THE RAMAYANA OF VALMEEKI

RENDERED INTO ENGLISH PROSE
WITH EXHAUSTIVE NOTES

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AYODHYAKANDA

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AYODHYAKANDAM

FOREWORD

The passage in Balakanda, chapter XVI, "Then there appeared, etc," indicates that "the Lord is He from whom this universe comes into being; it lives in Him ; and it enters into His bosom at the end." (*Taitt-up. Brahmavalli*). The attributes of the Supreme Person enumerated in the Purusha-sookta "I know this great Being, radiant as the sun, beyond the confines of Darkness," find an echo in the passage in chapter XIX.—"I know the real Rama, the great-souled One of invincible might." Kasyapa sings His glory (ch. XXIX) in terms that make it clear that He is the Supreme One of inconceivable greatness. All other gods stand far below Him, as "the shadow of doubt that lurked in the hearts of the gods vanished and Vishnu stood the mightier of the two." (ch. LXV). Valmeeki begins this kanda to bring out the truth that He is endowed with infinite perfections and excellences.

Or, we may take it that the Balakanda narrates in detail that the prominent characters of the poem, are distinguished by high lineage ; that they are instructed in the mysteries of the science and the art of war by Visvamitra, the great Teacher ; that, even so early, they show forth their might and valour by their easy victories over Tataka,

Subahu, Mareecha and the other Rakshasas; that Rama breaks to pieces the bow of Siva; that he takes back unto himself the bow of Vishnu; and that he is united to Seeta (Mahalakshmi). All this is in perfect consonance with the doings of the Lord as related in the succeeding kandas. The Ayodhyakanda illustrates his perfect obedience to the behests of his father and his vigilant observance of other ordinary duties of life. We are also taught duties of a higher order. Lakshmana exemplifies the life of one entirely devoted to the service of the Lord; Bharata is the ideal of supreme self-surrender to the Lord; and Satrughna lives only in the service of the Lord's Elect.

Or, it may be that the Balakanda describes the union of the Lord with the goddess Sree; while the Ayodhyakanda describes his union with the goddess Bhoomi

Or, the Balakanda emphasises the supreme and absolute aspect of the Lord, while the Ayodhyakanda brings into prominence his accessibility (Soulabhya).

Or, the Balakanda describes the nature of the Goal—the Lord as united to Lakshmi, while the Ayodhyakanda describes the nature and attributes of the Jeeva (Monad). The life of Satrughna illustrates the duty of devoting ourselves to the service of the Lord's Elect—the simplest means, the most secret and the most necessary.

CHAPTER I

DASARATHA RESOLVES TO CROWN RAMA KING

SATRUGHNA, the faultless, Satrughna, the proud victor over our sleepless foes, Desire and Hate, Greed and Envy, Pride and Ignorance, was affectionately invited by Bharata to be his companion during his visit to his uncle, Yudhajit. The lord of the Kekayas loved his nephew even as his own son; and entertained him with presents of noble steeds, ornaments, dresses and banquets; yet, Bharata stayed there only because his beloved Satrughna was with him. Their life was a happy one at the court of king Asvapati, with everything that the heart could desire; but, their reverend sire was ever in the thoughts of the valiant princes. "The snows of sixty thousand winters crown our father's head, even as the lofty Himalaya. It is preposterous for any one to expect that he could continue to bear on his mighty shoulders the huge burden of government. The gods grant that he crown our Rama king. Our place is at his feet, to serve him in all affection and reverence; we but waste the precious moments here"

All along, the aged Dasaratha, whose fame and splendour grew and grew in that he was the thrice-fortunate parent of the noble princes, yearned for their bright presence. "It is grievous enough to be parted from my Bharata and Satrughna, who are attached to one another even as Indra and Varuna. All my riches, all my power, all my splendour are to me as naught, when the children of my heart are not where my aged eyes can fondly rest upon them." He looked upon his sons as four arms sprung from his body. In his loving heart they found an equal place. But, even as the great Demiurge, Brahma, among the count-

less myriads who adore him, Rama drew Dasaratha towards him by the might of his countless perfections. For, was he not Vishnu, the Lord of Eternity, come down on earth as Rama in response to the prayers of the Gods, who desired at his hands the destruction of Ravana whose pride and haughtiness knew no bounds? Aditi, the happy mother of Indra, shone not with brighter radiance than Kausalya, the thrice blessed mother of Rama, the Lord of Boundless Light. To none other on earth, or in the heavens, was it given to be the mother of such a son.

He was a dream of beauty, the soul of valour, from envy free and like unto his father in character, conduct and tastes. Soft and gentle was ever his speech, the true index of a serene heart; no one was known to speak to him harshly; and, even if it was so, Rama never spake back, nor was provoked to taunts. The lightest act of service from any was indelibly graven upon his heart, which magnified it beyond count and rejoiced beyond measure; neither the lapse of time, nor the question of motive affected him in the least. But, the evil that others did him, though past all count, never left the slightest trace on his memory; for, was he not the Soul of the universe, the Lord of matter and its illusions?

He ever sought the company and conversation of good men, grown grey in years, wisdom and virtue, even in the intervals snatched from martial exercises. His thoughts were ever engaged in the solution of the problem of conferring the highest happiness possible on humanity. Pleasant of speech, he was ever the first to address others, however low they may be in the social of scale. Of boundless might to destroy the foes that threatened his friends and dependents, yet his heart was ever lowly and meek. He would never soil his lips with an untruth, even with a harmless tale. He ever advanced to meet the elders and reverenced

them duly. Every one of his subjects was the object of his especial care and affection and they returned his love with a full measure and overflowing. His heart ever went out in pity and compassion to all alike, and the sight of other's misery was too much for him to bear. Anger was sternly kept under control by him. Men of profound wisdom and saintly lives were ever sure of his respect and veneration. The needy and the afflicted found a warm corner in his heart. He knew the mysteries of Law and Duty in general and in detail. He ever set before himself as a law of his life to offer refuge to all beings that should need it. He never coveted for the possessions of others. He held it as an article of faith that mercy, compassion, protection to those that seek it, and stern repression of the wicked and the evil-minded, were the prime duties of his order. It was the surest way to win bright fame on earth and the brighter worlds of the gods hereafter. Master of every art and science, yet he never wasted the precious moments of his life in idle games or pastimes. His soul turned away with disgust from all idle and coarse talk that lure men into the paths of evil. Like unto Brihaspati, the priest and counsellor of Indra, he was unrivalled in weighty speech and quick reply. Rejoicing in the possession of perfect health and peace of heart, he was a lovely youth, strong and hardy. Men hung on the honeyed words that flowed from his lips. He well knew the right time and place and conditions for the study of the Sacred Law. He read at a glance into the innermost depths of the hearts of others, their strength, their weakness, their merits and their faults. Evil or offence to him, treachery or spite but evoked from his heart mightier currents of compassion and sympathy.

Prince Rama, dowered with every excellence and perfection, was dearer to his subjects than the very breath of their nostrils.

He sat at the feet of the best and ablest masters and reverently learned from them the secrets of every art and science. He kept the prescribed vows and observances, and duly obtained permission from his teachers to close the student's career and take upon himself the heavier responsibilities of a householder. He was well-versed in vedic lore, exoteric and esoteric. He excelled his famed father in his proficiency in the arts of war and bowmanship. He gloried in his proud and spotless lineage. He was the centre of everything good and beneficient, faultlessly perfect, and of firm and earnest faith in the Higher Wisdom. Of unruffled heart and unclouded intellect, he was ever true of speech even under the most trying circumstances. He was straight of heart, speech and act. Saintly Brahmanas, grown grey in years and wisdom, guided his early steps on the narrow path of Right and Duty. The pursuit of Duty, Gain and Pleasure had its claims and bounds well-defined with him. With a phenomenal keenness of memory, he possessed infinite resource and tact and was expert in the discharge of civil business. Respectful to all, he was yet unfathomable of purpose. His face or acts betrayed not in the least the counsel of his heart. His councillors were the cleverest of the age. Neither his wrath nor his favour went for nothing. He knew full well when to give profusely and when to acquire wealth by just means. His heart went out in adoration to the Gods and to the teachers. His knowledge of the Eternal Verities was clear and profound. He kept away from the company of the foolish and the ways of the evil-hearted. Softly slow and deliberate of speech, he was ever diligent in the pursuit of knowledge and keen to pierce to the heart of the sciences. No one was more aware of his faults and failings or of the weakness of his kingdom and of his enemies. The Vedas, the Vedangas, the thirty-two sciences, and the sixty-four arts were mastered by him in

detail. He was intimate with the final truths and conclusions on all subjects of human interest. He read at a glance the fine and delicate distinctions between man and man. He was ever assiduous in attracting to himself friends, refugees and good men, as also in fulfilling the fondest wishes of their heart, in consonance with the laws of kingly polity. He knew with wonderful precision when to lay the heavy hand of punishment upon a man and where. The busy bees extract not sweet honey from blossoming flowers more delicately and without disturbing them, than he filled the royal coffers with the wealth ungrudgingly offered by his loving subjects He followed the traditions of royalty in spending a quarter or a half or three-quarters of his income, but never more. He was far and away the most learned in religious lore and likewise in the lay literature of his age, in Sanskrit, Prakrit and the other dialects. Pleasure found in him a warm follower, but with strict regard to the demands of Duty and Gain He put his heart into everything that he did. He was proficient in painting, vocal and instrumental music, sculpture, poetry and the other departments of the fine arts. Works of charity,and measures that would enhance his fame had the first claim upon his wealth ; his friends, relations and dependents came next ; a third portion was set apart as reproductive capital ; and what remained, he spent upon himself. None excelled him in the art of training and guiding horses, elephants and camels He knew to perfection the innermost mysteries of the Science of the Bow. The foremost warriors of his time (Atirathas) looked upon him as their master. He placed himself at the head of his troops, advanced fearlessly upon the embattled ranks of the enemy, pierced into their intricate impenetrable vyuhas (arrays) and scattered them like chaff before the wind, all the while warding off danger and disaster from his own men. He was expert in marshalling soldiers into various

and wonderful arrays. Men nor gods nor asuras ever dreamt of standing up to him even in their wildest moments of fury. He put away from himself envy, ill-temper, pride and calumny. It was foreign to his nature to be unkind or haughty to the meanest object in creation. The wheel of Time that rolls on ceaselessly with its flashing spokes of the three gunas, rhythm, action and inertia, never reflected its varying motions in his heart, which ever remained çalm, serene and pure. Meek and patient even as Mother Earth, Rama was the dearest object to the three worlds, so bright shone he in his excellences. Profoundly wise as Brihaspati, valiant as Indra, he drew to himself the hearts of his people and of king Dasaratha from whose loins he sprung. The glory of his perfections illumined the utmost corners of the world, even as the countless rays of the noon-day sun. Steadfast in his resolve to protect those that took refuge in him, of unfailing might and valour, happy in the possession of every thing that the heart could desire, he occupied the foremost place in the thoughts of the people, who eagerly looked forward to the day when he would reign over them.

Dasaratha, the terror of his foes, looked with a fond eye on the darling of his heart, and said to himself, "Long beyond mortal count have been my days upon earth, and I have drunk the cup of life even to the lees. What should I desire now more than to see my beloved Rama, of matchless excellence, reign in my stead ? May the winged hours haste forward the day when I would see the brows of my Rama encircled with the crown of the Ikshvakus. For, he is ever intent upon making the rich men of my kingdom richer ; he is ready to help and upraise those whom the "slings and arrows of outrageous" Fortune have struck low. My people love him more than myself, even as the welcome clouds that pour their cool waters over the parched lips of

the burning earth. Like unto Yama, the god of Death and Indra, the ruler of the Shining Ones in might; like unto Brihaspati in knowledge and wisdom ; strong of heart and unshaken even as the Himalaya, it is but meet that he stands high above myself in worth and in the people's esteem. It behoves me to close my long life by giving myself the pleasure to see my son crowned as king ; and then I might, with a contented heart, take my place in the Mansions of the Blessed."

He next took counsel with his ministers and advisers, who were loud in their praises of Rama as the living embodiment of countless excellences rare in other kings ; and he decided to resign his kingdom in favour of his eldest son. He urged upon his counsellors the necessity of hastening the happy day. The snows of age weighed very heavy upon him, and ominous protents in the heavens, in the middle world and on earth warned him of coming calamity and mishap. His subjects, and himself more than they, lived in the light of Rama's presence and forgot their griefs and sorrows therein; verily the moment was approaching when the world was to enter upon a new era of peace and prosperity ; all the more reason why he should be quick in bringing it about. Fleet messengers were dispatched in hot haste to invite the kings under him, the leaders of men in town and village, his friends near and far, as well as those who ever had his welfare at heart. No word did he send to the king of the Kekayas or to Janaka ; they lived far away and might as well hear the happy news later on. They readily responded to his invitation and were right royally entertained as became their rank and worth. Like Brahma, the Ancient, in his high world, king Dasaratha sat on his royal throne in all his pomp and splendour and gave audience to those who waited to pay him their respects. They entered the vast hall and ranged themselves therein

according to the rules of precedence. All eyes were respectfully turned upon Dasaratha—kings, citizens, provincials and friends, who stood high in the love and esteem of the aged monarch and now encircled him as the high gods press round their king Indra.

CHAPTER II.

VOX POPULI.

WHEN king Dasaratha addressed himself to his expectant audience, riveted their attention upon himself and spoke to them, in accents clear, of that which conduced to their welfare and joy. His sonorous voice filled the spacious hall even as the war-drum or the thunderclouds and was given back in mighty echoes ; it was inimitably sweet to the ear and richly redolent with kingly graciousness. " Kings, friends, my people ! None know better than yourselves how Ikshwaku, Raghu and other ancestors of mine, of glorious memory, watched over this empire of Kosala even as it were the darling of their hearts. Unworthy descendant of such a brilliant line, it is in my heart to confer upon my people and kingdom yet greater happiness and prosperity; for, none deserve it more. May I be allowed to believe that I have tried my level best to discharge my duty towards you, treading upon the intricate paths of kingly polity with unsleeping care and with a strict eye to the traditions of my race. But, years past count lie heavy upon me and I am now grown grey, even as yon snow-white royal umbrella under the shade of which I have been watching over your welfare. Unlike king Yayati, I have put away from me all hankering after the pleasures of happy youth and active life. It is but meet

and just that I give a little rest to this body of mine that has served me so faithfully and so well for sixty thousand years, ere I lay it down. My broad shoulders have borne for unnumbered centuries this mighty burden of state and cannot but be wearied beyond words. For, it is no light task, even for the young and temperate, who are richly dowered with energy, valor and tact; it is beyond the dreams of such as are not stern masters of their senses and allow them to lead their steps astray; it requires varied kinds of accomplishments and means. For a very long time I have borne this huge orb of state and its attendant cares of guiding aright the feet of the millions under me upon the narrow path of Dharma and I must be allowed a respite. If the saintly Brahmanas here, my friends and my people give their unqualified assent to my proposal, I mean to place my son in charge of the kingdom and enjoy a short period of quiet. Rama, my first-born, whom I have fixed upon to take my place as heir-apparent, has the valor of Indra and his skill, and before him fall, like ripened head of corn, the foemen's cities and their pride. He takes after me in all goodly graces and excellences ; he is the foremost champion of Right ; he is the prince of men for power and might. Radiant beyond compare, even as the full-orbed moon in his glorious mansion of the constellation Pushya, I have set my heart upon crowning him as heir-apparent on the auspicious day when the moon is in conjunction with Pushya. Of boundless glory, Rama, the elder brother of Lakshmana, is, I ween, a worthy lord of this my kingdom, and of you my faithful subjects. The three worlds will rejoice in peace and prosperity under the shadow of his mighty arm. Grant me to make him your ruler ; grant me to make over to him this weighty crown and its attendant responsibilities ; it will be the dawn of a happy era for the earth and my heart will grow young with joy indescribable. I pray you

give your well-thought consent to it only if it seems to you that I have formed this plan after mature deliberation, only if the act would be crowned with happy success. But, should it seem to you otherwise, pray advise me the wiser course. It may be that this seems right in my eyes; but, I am sure that greater good will come of it if I take counsel with you, who are moved solely by considerations of the common weal." The princes assembled heard him out in wrapt attention and answered back in glad acclaim, as the gay peacocks rejoice at the welcome sound of surcharged clouds. The vast crowd lifted its voice in mighty applause, the echoes of which shook the huge dome of the audience hall to its very base.

Then, Maharshi Vasishtha and the holy Brahmanas, the invited kings and princes, citizens and provincials took deep counsel each with himself, and then together; a keen observation of the time, the place, the face and the features of the king convinced them that he regarded it as an act of duty to nominate the heir-apparent in his life-time. And with one accord they gave answer to Dasaratha, "Lord of men! Long years have you reigned over us in glory and have grown grey in years in consequence. So, we pray that you instal your eldest son Rama as the heir apparent. Doubt not that we are well aware of your care and solicitude for the welfare of this kingdom, even when long centuries have rolled over you. But, our eyes yearn to be blessed with the sight of Rama riding along in royal pomp on the huge state-elephant, while the royal white umbrella comes, all enviously, now and then between us and the glory of his countenance. We can but pray to you and it rests with you make it fruitful."

Dasaratha feigned not to catch the drift of their appeal and said "Kings and people! I do not really see how you can desire to have Rama as your lord and ruler, when you

yourself bear grateful testimony to my able and watchful care over you. I pray you tell me the truth of it."

Then, the people all made ready reply, prince and peasant, high and low. "Blame us not in that we find in Rama, your son, rare and matchless perfections Hear us expatiate, though all unworthy, upon the countless graces of body and mind of Rama, the idol of our hearts, like unto the high gods, and trained in the ways of righteousness by eminent men. Joy unspeakable and affectionate love well up in the hearts of those that speak of it, of those that listen to it, of those that contemplate it In him valiant might is ever fruitful ; the lord of the Celestials claims not higher attributes; he towers aloft over the kings of the royal line of Ikshvaku ; that best of men is ever intent on Truth and Law. From him flow unasked Dharma and Wealth, the fruit thereof Of happy presence, the bright lord of Night delights not your subjects more ; of sweet patience even as Mother Earth, he vies with Brihaspati in keen intellect and with Mahendra, the lord of Sachi. in valor ; he has sounded the depths of Duty, general and particular ; of unfailing resolve, yet his greatness offers no bar to sincere and intimate converse with lower grades of intellect ; he has put away from himself envy, that causelessly sees in other faults that are not. The defects of those that seek refuge in him have no power to ruffle his forbearing spirit ; he ever labours to conciliate the anger and soothe the grief of those that chance to offend him Gentle and kind of speech, he ever magnifies the paltry benefits conferred upon him by others; innocent of the ways of the wicked, his heart can never bear to be away from those that depend upon him; dire adversity and distress have no power to prevent the fulfilment of his promises to others ; ever at the disposal of his friends and dependents, the arrows of envy fall away from him blunt and broken. He has ever a sweet word and kind

to all, but keeps within the strict bounds of truth. The Brahmanas grown grey in years, wisdom and saintliness, are the objects of his veneration ; hence, unbounded generosity, valor and irresistable might do but widen immeasurably his full-orbed fame. He is an adept in the mysteries of all the weapons and astras known to men, gods and asuras. He has sat at the feet of his revered Guru to study the Vedas and the Vedanta, has kept the prescribed vows and has gone through the closing rite of Samavartana. He is an expert musician, in that it assists him in the chanting of Samans. Pure and stainless is his high ancestry and he outshines it in his own purity The wheel of Time has nothing to bring up that could shake his iron fortitude ; hence his intellect and genius are of a very rare order. Wise Brahmanas have had the charge of guiding his steps on the intricate paths of Duty and Right, teachers famed for spotless lineage, profound learning, lowliness of heart, and marvellous power of expounding the Soul-doctrine of the Law. He never returns from his frequent expeditions against the foemen's armies, towns or citadels, but is aye crowned with victory, he and his shadow Lakshmana. His military duties over, he comes back to the capital on horse or elephant, chariot or palanquin and fails not to make paternal enquiries about the welfare of the citizens, deep and searching. 'Dear sirs, ! Is it all well with you, your wives, your children and pupils ? Are the Holy Fires receiving due attention and worship ? Your servants and pupils are, I believe, regular and assiduous in their services to you.' None among his people, rich or poor, high or low, is touched with any grief or sorrow, but our Rama is by his side to help or soothe him. He never forgives himself for it nor forgets ; 'for,' says he 'mine the blame, mine the fault, since they are my charge.' Alike, he rejoices in the joy of his people, sincere and whole-hearted even as their very father.

The darkest hours of adversity have never been able to dim the spotless mirror of his truthful soul. The foremost bowman of any age, past or present, he is ever the humble servant of the Elders, with restrained senses and smiling speech. The fierce waves of misfortune do but play about his feet firmly planted on the Rock of Duty. He enters with heart and soul into everything he desires for the people's welfare. He is ever known to turn away from the light talk and social inanities that good men condemn heartily. Brihaspati has not such a wealth of ready wit and quick repartee. His beautifully arched brows do but heighten by contrast the loveliness of his large star-like eyes. We take him more as Maha Vishnu come down in mortal guise among His dear children. Death has no terrors for him, not the slightest · calm and self-possessed, he causes his foes to flee before him, mad Terror at their heels ; his fiery energy and valor finds him ever the first to pierce into the intricate battle-arrays of his foes and to scatter them before him like chaff, be they the foremost of gods or asuras. None knows better than he the deep mysteries of kingly polity and the surest way to compass the happiness and weal of his subjects. The joys of sensual life have never any attraction for him. The governance of the three worlds would but barely occupy a portion of his time and attention ; why speak of this paltry globe ?

His wrath or favor was never known to be fruitless, The guilty ever found his hand heavy upon them ; but the innocent never came in for a share of his displeasure. One has but to find favor in his eyes, to have his heart's wishes fulfilled to the uttermost, Unruffled patience and other countless excellences that claim the applause and love of the people, shed a halo of glory round him, even as the noon day Sun crowned with his fiery rays. Nay, dear lord, we are convinced that he is sent down on earth by the Giver

of good to be your son and confer upon you untold happiness, even as the Almighty deigned to bless Mareechi with his boy Kasyapa. Gods and Asuras, Gandharvas and Uragas, kings and sages, citizens and provincials, your people and strangers, ever lift their hands and hearts in devout prayer to the Causeless Cause that Rama's days on earth might never grow less and that fame and goodly life, health and strength, might ever wait upon him. Stately matrons, light hearted girls, and dames staggering under the burden of their years, ever offer devout and careful worship to every god, high and low, morn, noon and dewy eve, that their darling Rama may be crowned as heir-apparent. Lord of us all! it behoves you to fulfil the dearest wishes of their hearts, to grant the earnest prayer of their souls. Our eyes do hunger for the hour when they can feast upon the sight of Rama enthroned as king in your place—Rama the best and brightest of your sons, Rama of dark hue, even as the petals of the blue Utpala, Rama, the terror of his foes. None have been known to seek you in vain; hence our earnest prayer that you crown your long and glorious reign with an act of supreme grace to us, by placing over this realm Rama, like unto the Lord of the universe, ever intent on the common weal and the centre of all that is good and great. And let not envious Time come between us and the realisation of our hopes."

CHAPTER III.

KINGLY PRECEPTS

ASARATHA heard them out joyfully, as they prayed to him with joined palms above their heads. He honor'd them duly with a look or a word or a smile and said,

"My children! It gives me boundless delight to hear your unanimous wish to see my eldest son Rama crowned as heir-apparent. My greatness and glory have been enhanced thereby." His sweet and thoughtful reply filled their hearts with the wildest joy. He next turned to Vasishtha and Vamadeva and said "This month of Chitra is the first and best of its kind. All trees put on their gayest and happiest garb now. The month in which Rama saw the light is come round, by happy coincidence, to witness his installation. Hence, I pray you to see to the necessary arrangements."

Now that the assembled multitude were sure of their long-cherished hopes being amply realized and speedily, shouts of joy rent the welkin and calmed down after a time. Then, Vasishtha the wise, proud of the glorious task entrusted to him, addressed himself to Sumantra and his colleagues who stood before him in respectful salutation, and said "Gold, gems, grain, pulse, medicinal plants, garlands of white flowers, fried grain, honey, clarified butter, new cloths, chariot, weapons of all kinds, our troops, men, horse, elephants and chariots, elephants with auspicious marks, a white chamara, flags, a snow-white umbrella, a hundred vessels of gold bright as blazing fire, a bull with gold-tipped horns, a tigerskin all whole, sandal paste, flowers and other necessaries should be ready stored by dawn in the royal sacrificial chamber. See that thousands of saintly Brahmanas are then given with all respect and reverence, food, milk, curds, condiments, ghee, fried grain and ample presents of coin. Remind the Brahmanas deputed to the work that they should begin to chant the benedictive hymns and let them be provided with suitable seats. See that the houses look gay with flags; let the royal roads be well-watered. Let dancers in bright array be stationed in the second block

of the palace and with them their instructors and skilled musicians. Appoint Brahmanas to be present at the holy fanes and cross-roads to pay heedful worship to the gods with food, sweets and garlands ; let chosen warriors in warlike guise range themselves in the coronation hall with their long bright swords girt bravely on their thighs." The sages twain directed them further to enlist the necessary servants and retainers and completed the arrangements for the auspicious ceremony. They came to the king in joyful mood and said, "Your Majesty's orders have been executed."

Then, Dasaratha, of bright presence, called Sumantra to him and said, "Go, bring me on the wings of speed, Rama, my darling boy of spotless virtue ;" and the aged minister hastened upon his happy mission.

Kings of realms, north and south, east and west, chiefs of the non-Aryan races, dwellers of the dark forests and lofty mountains ranged themselves round the old monarch, even as the radiant Gods press round their glorious leader. The mighty emperor, girt by them, as Indra by the hierarchy of Maruts, glanced down at the royal road and saw his boy coming up on his chariot. His eyes would never have enough of feasting themselves upon the lovely vision. Supremely handsome, even as the king of the Gandharvas, yet was Rama the very ideal of valor ; with long and sinewy arms, his exquisitely modelled frame masked an immensity of strength ; of lordly gait even as the maddened elephant in rut, his face was sweet to look at and charmed the hearts of the beholders, even as the full-orbed Queen of night ; and people felt that they could gaze their lives away. His beauty, large-heartedness, and other noble attributes enslaved the looks and the hearts of even the members of his sex. Creatures, whose bodies and brains have been parched and broiled by the merciless rays of the summer

sun, cannot gaze too often at the black clouds that lead to them the welcome showers ; even so did Dasaratha gaze and yet gaze on the dream of loveliness that grew upon his vision. Meanwhile the prince's chariot stopped at the royal gates, and Sumantra offered his arm to Rama as he got down, and followed him with folded palms in all reverence, as he took his way to where his royal sire awaited him. He ascended the steps leading to the lofty hall above, that reminded one of the Kailasa peak, approached the king with joined hands of reverence and offered him due salutation, announcing his own name and lineage. Dasaratha drew, with loving haste, his god-like son towards himself, embraced him warmly, and saw him seated high on a gemmed throne by his side. The splendour of his presence irradiated the vast hall, even as the golden mount Meru crowned with the bright rays of the rising sun, even as the star-bespangled firmament with the pure cool rays of the antumn moon. The heart of the aged king knew no bounds to its joy as he fondly gazed at his son, even as at the reflection of his own stately person in a burnished mirror.

Dasaratha, the happiest of fathers, turned to his boy with a smile and said, " Rama, my darling son ! Your rare excellences constitute you the brightest ornament of our race. You are born to me of a lady in every way worthy of myself. My subjects are supremely pleased with your noble qualities and I intend to make you the ruler of this realm to-morrow, when the moon is in auspicious conjunction with the asterism Pushya. You are richly dowered by nature with countless perfections of body, mind and heart. You ever reverence the good and the great. Yet, a fond father's heart would seek to give you further counsel. I would have you yet more humble and modest, yet more self-restrained. Put away from you the seven kinds of royal

faults that spring of Desire and Hate. Govern your ministers and officials directly and the others through them ; fail not to give audience every day and possess yourself of everything that you can gather from direct observation, even as you are every moment aware of the doings of your foes through your eyes and ears—your spies and residents. Increase ever your stores of coin, gold and silver, gems, grain, warlike appliances and weapons, until your people come to place implicit and entire confidence in you and exclaim out of a full heart 'Blessed are we above compare in that we have such a king over us', even as the shining Ones rejoiced at the sight of the Waters of Immortality. So keep your senses and mind under perfect control and act as I would have you."

Thus spake Dasaratha, with the authority of years and experience, even as the Patriarch Kasyapa advises the Ruler of the Heavens. * Friends and companions of Rama strove who should be the first to take the glad tidings to Kausalya, the happy mother. And the noble queen loaded the welcome messengers with gifts of gold and gems, kine and horses. Rama bowed low in reverent obeisance to his sire, who accorded him reluctant permission to depart and rode back to his splendid palace through the dense crowds that strove to do him honor.

The vast concourse of citizens that filled the hall felt their hearts bound with joy, as if their long-cherished hopes were unexpectedly realized ; they took respectful leave of their monarch and hied back to their houses and were busy offering devout prayers to their favorite deities that the coronation of their beloved Rama should come off without a hitch."

CHAPTER IV

KAUSALYA'S JOY

THE conscientious monarch again took deep counsel with his ministers and friends and finally dicided to crown lotus-eyed Rama as heir-apparent, the next day when the moon should ride in conjunction with Pushya. He returned to his apartments and said to Sumantra "Go, bring unto me once again Rama, my heart's delight."

The aged minister was at the gates of Rama's palace in no time. The wardens apprised the prince of his arrival, who was troubled with a doubt. "How now? Has any thing come between my sire and his resolve?" Yet he called Sumantra to him and said "Pray let me know clearly what brings you here again." And to him spake Sumantra "Rama! your father desires to see you again. I am but the humble mouth-piece of his Majesty and you know best how to act." The words of the minister but hastened Rama's steps towards his father's palace, which he entered with an expectant heart.

The wardens ran to announce him to the king, who ordered the prince to be brought to him at once, that he might communicate to him excellent and pleasant tidings. Rama entered and saluted the monarch with deep respect, even when at a distance. Dasaratha sprang to meet him with open arms, gave him a magnificient seat and said "Rama! excuse my telling you that I am grown very old in years and experience. I have drained the cup of life to the full. Countless sacrifices have I performed and stinted not in food or coin, kine or gems, even as the Books lay it down. I have had the pleasure of giving away untold wealth to my kith and kin, friends and dependents. I have tasted of the sterner joys of a warrior's life in all their

varieties; I am clear of my debts to the Gods, to the Rishis, to the Pitris, to the Brahmanas and to myself through countless sacrificial rites, religious studies, begetting of offspring, costly gifts and enjoyment of the pleasures of life respectively. I have now a worthy son unto me and unequalled in the three worlds. My last duty to myself and to my expectant subjects is but the pleasant one of handing over the charge of this kingdom to you. So, pay good heed to what I say and having heard, obey. Again, all my subjects pray to me that Rama should be lord over them ; that is another reason why I should crown you king. Further, my sleep is troubled with ominous dreams of coming evil ; terrific meteors fall from the cloudless skies accompanied by destructive thunder bolts. The sun, Mars, Rahu and other maleficient planets do aspect my natal star, so say the wise in starry lore. It is evident that these are the forerunners of the death of kings or of parallel disasters ; that again is an additional reason for my crowning you with all despatch. Moreover, men's minds do change ever; and before mine comes under the seductive influence of my other queens, I wish to place the crown on your head. The moon stays today with the star Punarvasu and leaves it to-morrow for Pushya, which astrological experts declare to be most auspicious for a king's coronation ; hence my desire to lose no time. I am resolved to carry out my plan to-morrow at any cost. It is meet that you and Seeta spend this night in fast and devout prayer on a couch of sacred grass. It is in the order of things that numerous obstacles would start in the path of such good resolves ; so, take good care that your friends and well-wishers guard you against any harm or evil, within or without. Bharata, your brother, is a paragon of goodly conduct; your word is a law unto him; his iron will and chastened spirit keeps his senses under perfect control; he is the soul of compassion ; but, it is a long time since he left this place

for his uncle's country. None can call himself so righteous or good or firm of resolve but Persuasion's guileful tongue can lure him away. So, it behoves us to accomplish our purpose ere Bharata comes back here." Having thus opened his heart to his son in the privacy of his apartments, he gave him permission to return to his palace.

Rama lost not a moment in repairing to the mansion of his mother Kausalya to acquaint her with the glad news. He found her in the hall of worship, dressed in white silk, pure, silent and restrained of breath ; the news of Rama's coronation the next day filled her with wild joy, and she was earnestly praying with introspective eyes to Maha Vishnu, her favorite deity, that Rama should succeed his father on the throne. Sumitra, Lakshmana and Seeta had been sent for before and were with her. Rama saluted his mother with all humility and said, " It would give you pleasure to know that my father has intimated to me his pleasure to crown me to-morrow as the heir-apparent and place me over the people. The priests and the chaplains heard him direct me and Seeta here to spend this night in fast and prayer. I pray you to instruct us as to the vows we should keep towards my consecration to-morrow."

The words fell sweetly on the long-expectant ears of Kausalya ; tears of joy shook her voice as she replied, " Darling Rama ! May your days upon earth continue ever. May confusion dire wait on your foes. Rule over us and rejoice the hearts of the kith and kin of myself and of my sister Sumitra here. It was a wondrous moment when you saw the light ; for, are you not the joy of your father's heart through your good gifts? Long did I pray and earnestly to Mahavishnu ; and my prayers, my vows, my fasts and mortifications have borne ample fruit, in that the bright crown of the Ikshwakus rests on your fair brows. Glad am I beyond expression."

Rama turned to his brother at his side and said to him who raised folded palms of reverence to his head, "Lakshmana! Brother mine! This kingdom, its pomp and power are more for you, my other self. You will have a very busy time of it, I ween, in ruling over the countless myriads of our subjects. Sumitra's happy son! I hope to see you gladden your mother's heart and taste the sweets of regal power, gold and gems, dress and jewels, pomp and dignity. Need I assure you that this empire and everything it can give, nay, my very life, is dear to me and welcome but for your sake?"

Thereafter, Rama and Seeta took reverent leave of their elders and received permission to retire to their abode.

CHAPTER V

RAMA'S FAST

DASARATHA next sought saint Vasishtha and said to him with a bow, "May it please your Reverence to go to Rama and see that he and his wife observe the fasts and vows that might ensure him wealth, health and a happy reign."

"I go, your majesty" replied Vasishtha and the sage, than whom stood none higher in the knowledge of vows, fasts, penances and potent spells, betook himself to Rama's palace upon a stately chariot. His priestly car he drove through three vast blocks of the mansion, even as dazzling lightning flashes through pale clouds. Rama heard him coming and approached him in all reverent haste. He lent his arm to aid Vasishtha to descend from his chariot, and touched his holy feet with his head. Vasishtha enquired after him kindly and said, "Rama! you have found high favour in your father's eyes and in consequence, he intends to place you over this realm to-morrow, even as Nahu-

sha installed Yayati, his son. Hence, it behoves you and your wife to spend the night in fast and meditation." He next ordained the fast and prayer by rule and text and took leave of the prince, with courteous honors gratified.

Rama remained yet a while in sweet converse with his friends who ever had a pleasant word for him ; then he bade them good-bye and retired to his apartments. He found them gay and bright with men and maids happily busy with the preparations for the morrow, even as some beautiful lotus lake studded with flowers that open their hearts to the rays of the rising sun, while gem-like birds of varied plume light above them with unsteady gait, maddened with frequent draughts of honey.

Meanwhile Vasishtha rode out from Rama's palace through the royal streets teeming with happy crowds in busy converse. The gentle breeze wafted the welcome sound to distant ears even as the muffled roar of the ocean-wave falling on drowsy ears. The town wore a gay look that night ; streets and by-ways were swept and cleaned and watered. The houses were decked with flags and banners that nodded, as it were, gentle welcome to one another. The gates were hid beneath clusters of plantains, mango leaves and palm fruits. Men, women and boys, rich and poor, high and low, waited expectant for the happy dawn that was to bring round the hour when they would rejoice in the sight of their beloved Rama crowned as king. Vasishtha took his way leisurely through the gay crowds, even as a mighty lord of the deep cleaving his way amid mountain billows. He passed up the stairs to where sat the expectant monarch, even as a bright denizen of the skies in his cloud-chariot. The whole audience rose as one man to accord reverend welcome to the saint, even as gods and angels lift their hands and hearts in awe and reverence to Brihaspati, the divine priest and counsellor. "Has Rama

been duly instructed in his holy task for the night" queried the fond king; to which the sage made reply, "Yea, my leige, even as you desired."

The king craved permission of his chaplain to retire for the night; he dismissed his audience and sought the privacy of his apartments, even as the monarch of the forest seeks his rocky lair. His presence illumined the happy halls, more splendid by far than the abode of the Lord of the Heavens and flashing bright with gemmed robes and gem-like eyes, even as the star-lit firmament suffused with the rising splendours of the Queen of night.

CHAPTER VI

GAY AYODHYA

RAMA followed the instructions of the saint to the letter. With a pure body and a purer mind, the happy pair offered lowly worship unto the Lord of Eternity. Rama raised the vessel of consecrated food and clarified butter high above his head; offered it unto the blazing Lord of Fire with holy mantras; partook of what remained, chanting an inward prayer for happiness and peace; washed his lips with holy water; and with tranquil mind and restrained senses, sought repose and Seeta with him, on the bed of sacred grass spread in the presence of the Deity of his heart.

He awoke in the last watch of the night and directed the decorations of his house against the morrow's solemn ceremony, while glad strains of joy and praise were borne to his ears from the bards and panegyrists gathered to wake him to the day's duties. He took his bath and offered devout prayer to the Goddess of the morning twilight and recited the sacred Gayatri with concentrated faculties. He

clad himself in robes of pure white and bowed low in reverence to the Lord of all, while Brahmanas raised their voices in mighty benediction. The holy strains announced the auspicious day of coronation to the assembled myriads over the capital, while gay and festive music kept sweet accompaniment thereto.

The people rejoiced to hear that Rama and Seeta spent the night in fast and devotion to prepare them for the rite of consecration on the morrow. The dawn saw them busy with the decorations of the happy town. Gay flags and lofty pennons rose high above the stately fanes of the Gods, towering aloft like fleecy clouds; over the domes that adorned the cross-ways; over the shrines of Buddha; over the turrets that crowned the impregnable fortifications; over the merchants' shops, rich with products of nature and art; over the wealthy mansions of the nobles; over public halls and lofty trees. Professors of the art of song and dance grouped themselves everywhere, discoursing sweet music that enthralled the senses of the listeners. As the hour drew near for the solemn function, men and women gathered in the houses, the streets and the squares to exchange news of the happy event. Bands of bright children would talk of nothing else as they played with careless glee before their houses. The royal roads were strewn with gay flowers and redolent with rich perfumes and sweet odours. The streets were covered with costly hangings of silk and gold, from which descended many a cluster of palm and areca. Lofty posts were erected at regular intervals to bear the lights that would dispel the growing gloom within. Thus, nature and art combined to make the city as gay and bright as possible. The assembled myriads waited expectant in houses and squares saying, "Dasaratha, of the line of Ikshwaku, has wisely realized his growing infirmities and has decided, in time, to crown his

son Rama in his place. The great Gods are merciful to us in that we are to have Rama as our ruler. He has an intimate knowledge of the varying grades of life, high and low; ever humble, wise and righteous, he lives but for his brothers; and we anchor our hopes therein that he will watch over our welfare with more than brotherly interest, for unnumbered years to come. Long live king Dasaratha and happy, in that his righteous resolve has enabled us to be the glad witnesses of the coronation of Rama." Thus they lauded high the aged monarch; and the sound of their voices rose above the town like the roar of the angry sea when the moon calls out to her at night. Nay, Ayodhya, fair as the lordly capital of Indra, *was* the sea; the countless millions that thronged therein from all quarters of the globe to witness Rama's installation were the denizens of the deep; and it was their voice and of the waves that rose on the night-air.

CHAPTER VII

MANTHARA, THE PLOTTER

NONE knew where she came from, nor of whom; she came along with the queen Kaikeyi when she rode into happy Ayodhya as the fond bride of the aged Dasaratha. She stood like a bird of evil omen in the balcony of the moon-white mansion of Kaikeyi and cast an idle glance on the busy town below her. The roads were neatly swept, well-watered and gaily decked. Bright flags and proud bannerets crowned the houses. The city walls had been pierced with fresh gates for the easy passage of the joyful crowds that would throng the town to partake of the festivities. The people were fresh from their bath, clean-looking and cheerful. Rama's palace gates were crowded

with Brahmanas chanting holy hymns, with their humble tribute of garlands and sweets to their well-beloved prince. Strains of sweet music rose from every quarter. Groups of happy men and women filled the streets with their bright presence and brighter talk; even the horses and elephants, cows and bulls rejoined loudly in expectation of the happy event. The lofty gates of holy shrines glittered white in the soft moonlight. And Manthara, of dark heart, marvelled much at the sight.

She turned to a girl that stood near clad in spotless white, gazing with open-eyed amaze and pleasure at the lovely scenes that presented themselves to her view. "Friend! can you tell me why Kausalya is so free and lavish with her gold? She was ever known to be close-fisted and greedy of wealth. What mean these gay and happy crowds? What wonderful pageant, what new surprise, has our king for us?" The maid was glad to get some one with whom she could share her overwhelming joy and replied "King Dasaratha has decided to seat our darling Rama on the royal throne and that even to-morrow, when the star Pushya rules the day; and it is no wonder that the people are beside themselves with joy; for none deserve it more than Rama of sweet patience and spotless purity, whom the mighty Gods have crowned with rare perfections." The words roused black envy in the heart of the hunchback; and down from the terrace, lofty as Kailasa's peak, she sped on the wings of haste to where Kaikeyi slept. Wicked thoughts seethed in her brain while her heart was aflame with wrath. "Sleep you, foolish one! Awake, arise, for, dread Peril draws near you. Why see you not the dark clouds of misfortune right over your head? You brag of your rare beauty and good fortune that have made you the heart's delight of your royal husband. But, too well I know that *you* have no place in his affections. His favour and your happy

days are even now drawing to an end, like a mountain torrent drained by Summer's fierce heat."

These cruel words from the enraged heart of her handmaid, whose fond interest masked her wicked wiles, cut to the heart the lovely queen. She gazed at Manthara in curious amaze and said "What? This from you! I fear some unseen evil has clouded your heart and brain. Your wan face argues a suffering heart. Speak free and it will go hard with me if I do not bring joy and solace back to you."

But, the kindly words of Kaikeyi added fuel to the flame of wrath that burnt in the heart of the scheming Manthara. Her mistress cared not even to acquaint herself with the news of Rama's coronation, with which the capital was ringing from end to end. Most eloquent for evil, she addressed herself to her diabolical task, she would make the very name of Rama hateful in the eyes of Kaikeyi; she would wring her heart with grief for her son, despoiled of his lawful crown; she would see that she had no safer watcher of her interests. "Lady! Know you not as yet that the foolish king will crown Rama as the ruler of this vast empire and that a few hours hence. I know not what greater evil can befall you; and it is hopeless to prevent it. You are the idol of my heart, my soul is plunged in the lowest depths of black sorrow; I suffer the tortures of the damned, a prey to consuming flames. I flew to you on the wings of speed to save you from your fate, if possible. I live or die with you. My hopes and fears are bound up with yours. Daughter of a mighty king, wedded to a mightier monarch, yet how blind to the cruel laws that guide the acts of kings! You are a sweet and gentle dove ensnared by a cruel and cunning vulture. Your husband is 'a rogue in grain, veneered with sanctimonious hypocrisy.' His honeyed words conceal a cruel and remorseless heart. You see not that he has taken base advantage of your pure and guileless heart.

He has cozened you with sweet talk of undying love and eternal fidelity, while his soul has been all the while busy plotting your ruin ; and now he has thrown off the mask and showers wealth and honor on his favorite queen Kausalya and her son. Ah, my queen! whose eyes fond love and foolish trust have blinded to the coming evil ! Am I to believe that you see not even now the black perfidy of yon smooth-tongued deceiver ? He has cunningly managed to keep your son Bharata far away and means to profit by his absence to give the crown to Rama ere the coming day draws to a close. Well can he do that and safely, in that there is none to stay him or say nay. Your husband but in name ; truth would call him your most relentless foe. Avoid him, now at least, as you would the Bringer of death. A heedless girl thou and all innocent, who clasps the glittering snake to her fond breast and fondles its cruel fangs, seeing not in it the fleet messenger of death. So have you placed your confiding soul in the keeping of your mortal enemy, who, to you, is the kindest and best of husbands But, even you will be convinced ere long that Dasaratha will work cruel woe unto you and your son, deadlier by far than serpent's tooth enraged, more pitiless than your insulted foe. Ah, gentle heart, that was made for a life of happiness and pleasure ! Dasaratha, the hoary sinner, has deluded you with soft and smooth phrases of love and devotion, only to crown Rama as king over this fair realm and send you, your son, your kith and kin to eternal perdition. Beware ere it is too late ; wake to your peril, now at least ; repose not in fancied security, but, put forth the might of your wondrous beauty and womanly wiles to enslave the heart of the foul deceiver ; and save from the brink of ruin your Bharata, yourself and me." Kaikeyi, who lay stretched at her ease, heard her out with a smile of amused pity ; but, the news of Rama's coronation thrilled her with unbounded joy ; her face reflected her

heart, even as the beauteous autumn moon; she rose in joyous haste and glad surprise, for, her earnest prayers and long-cherished hopes had borne fruit; she could not dream of a greater good fortune to herself and Bharata She threw a priceless necklace of flashing gems round the hunchback's neck as an earnest of her delight for the glad tidinigs she brought and said " None can rejoice more at Rama's coronation than I, his mother ; for, Rama and Bharata are the twin blossoms that grow from my heart. These are the sweetest words I have ever heard till now and I cannot reward you enough, the welcome bringer thereof. Ask what you will of me, for, it is yours."

Kaikeyi's innocent happiness and ready welcome but made the wicked Manthara more determined in her purpose of evil; the Goddess of speech, Sarasvati, possessed her heart at the prayer of the Gods and swayed her to her will.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TEMPTER

SHE flung aside with an air of contempt the costly present of her mistress; she really came to believe that a great danger threatened Kaikeyi, and was wroth with her for being so obstinately insensible to her well-meant advice. " Dull-witted ! How is it you know not that the waves of calamity are even now closing over your head ? I cannot for the very life of me appreciate your ill-timed raptures. The news of Rama's coronation is a death-blow to all our hopes ; and you rejoice where you should lament. But, I suffer with grief on your account. Nay, I am inclined to laugh every time I set my eyes on such an insane mistress. Rama is the son of your rival, is he

not? Then he is your Fate. The most stupid person would never derive any pleasure from hearing of the progress and prosperity of his deadliest enemy. I am deeply grieved to see your heart so perverted.

Perhaps, you have no idea of the grave consequences in store for you. This crown belongs of right as much to Bharata as to Rama; hence, your son is an object of fear and suspicion to him. The very thought fills me with despair. 'How can Rama's fear affect Bharata any way?' Well, ferocious animals and venomous snakes suspect a man in anticipation and seek to kill him to save themselves from fancied danger Even so, Rama would naturally seek to ruin Bharata, to save himself from future danger through him. 'But, this kingdom belongs to Lakshman and Satrughna too?' Yes; but Lakshmana, though mighty, is entirely devoted to Rama, body and soul; and Rama fears him not. Similarly, Bharata has nothing to fear from Satrughna. 'But, the younger princes, though devoted to their brothers would like to reign in their turn as well?' Well, Rama was born under the star Punarvasu; he gets the crown first. Next comes Bharata born under Pushya; next Lakshmana and last Satrughna. So, Rama will seek to make away with Bharata, who stands next to him. 'Rama is sure of coming to the throne first and need not entertain any doubt of Bharata's claims as a rival?' Well, Rama is a deep one; an expert in kingly polity; knows when to act and how; while your son Bharata is blissfully innocent of any such advantages. I tremble to think what he may suffer at the hands of Rama.

Kausalya is at the zenith of her glory and power. The holy Brahmanas will seat him on the royal throne to-morrow, when the bright star Pushya rains down its radiant influence. Kausalya too will be crowned with wealth and fame and set her foot on the necks of her enemies; and you, your

son Bharata, your kith and kin and we, your dependents should wait upon queen Kaikeyi in suppliant guise. It is Kausalya you should fear most. Bharata will take his place as the bond-man of Rama, the emperor. He will drag down along with him into the depths of sorrow and misery all that are near and dear to him ; while Rama's people, men and women, will rejoice in proportion."

The lofty nobility of Kaikeyi was proof against the insidious poison of Manthara's arguments ; she thought to disarm the hunchback's malice towards Rama by dwelling at length on his manifold excellences. "You are right if Rama be all that you say ; but, I know well that not one of your aspersions lies at his door. Dharma has no mysteries for the open eye of Rama ; great men and good have had him under training. He is an ideal for all sons to follow ; and above all, he is Dasaratha's first-born ; and who more deserving of the crown than he ?

Now let me show you how baseless your apprehensions are. It is no sound argument that this kingdom is the common property of Rama and his brothers.

Again, Rama (may his shadow never grow less) is a fond father to his brothers and dependents. It is madness pure to dream of evil to Bharata at the hands of Rama. I wonder why you are so much enraged and afflicted at the very news of Rama's coronation.

Bharata will have his day and sit on the throne of his fathers when Rama has reigned over the happy Kosalas for full five score years. So, Bharata he is sure to instal as heir-apparent, even now. It is but as it should be. Bharata will come in for his own Now, all in good time I see no earthly reason why you should be so much afflicted.

I heard you say that Rama's installation will work evil unto me. But, he is the darling of my heart ; and he waits

upon me ever with love and reverence even greater than what he shows to Kausalya that bore him.

It matters little even if Bharata does not take his place on the throne after Rama has adorned it for a hundred years. It makes no difference whether Bharata gets the crown or Rama; for, the virtuous prince looks upon his brothers as his very self"

Kaikeyi's noble defence of Rama filled Manthara's soul with wilder fears and deeper sorrow. She sighed long and hot and replied, "Oh, jaundiced eye that sees good in evil! Your feeble intellect stands in the way of your realizing the deep and shoreless ocean of misery wherein you are sunk. Bharata cheated of his lawful rights and exiled from fair Kosala, alas, what a pitiful sight! What wiseacre assured you that Bharata will succeed to the crown when Rama has worn it for a hundred years? The rising sun will see Rama seated on the throne of the Ikshwakus and his son will succeed him by right. So, Bharata need never dream of the royal crown. You are quick enough to defend Rama and work yourself up into unseasonable wrath when a poor creature like myself tries honestly to open your eyes to the truth. Not all the sons of a king sit upon the father's throne; if so, wild anarchy and tumult will wreck the kingdom. It is the eldest or the most deserving that is entrusted with the responsibilities of government. It is bad enough that Bharata is deprived of the crown; but worse is in store for him. He will be eternally shut out from any chance of government. Fond mother! your son will be driven from the kingdom; he will be hopelessly deprived of the power and the joys that are his by right of birth; he will wander over the earth like the meanest and most helpless of men. Perhaps Rama, the first boan, is an insuperable barrier in the way of Bharata's getting the throne now. But, would you hear of a way of circumvent-

ing the evil ? Why, I am here for that very purpose and alas! you see it not. The unprecedented good fortune of your rival fills your heart with overwhelming joy and seeks to reward me with costly presents in token thereof. Rama but waits to get the throne untroubled by rival claims, to exile Bharata to distant lands; or he may send him out of this world. And you have nicely and loyally assisted him in the good work by sending Bharata to the distant home of his uncle! Trees, plants and such like senseless objects do twine themselves round what stand near them. Even so would Dasaratha be drawn towards Bharata and Satrughna, were they with him; and it is you that took effectual measures to prevent it. Lakshmana ever shadows Rama ; nay, if Satrughna, the favourite of Bharata, were here at least, there is a chance that the old king may be reminded of his absent son ; and you have denied yourself that slender hope too. I have heard people say that some woodmen would fell a likely tree for fuel; but drew back at the sight of the thorny undergrowth that encircled it. So, Rama would shield Lakshmana and he in his turn would stand between Rama and danger. The celestial twins, the Aswinis, are not more attached to each other than they; and who knows it not? Lakshmana would never dream of evil to Rama; and Rama will ever seek the death of Bharata. Hence, it is better that your son flees to the distant forests from his uncle's country. For, Fate waits for him here. This seems to me good and for you too. Need I repeat that you and yours may enjoy wealth, power, fame and all delights that life can give, only if Bharata's brows are encircled with the royal crown ? Forget not that he is the son of Kaikeyi, the hated rival of Kausalya ! Born to inherit the highest place in the world and enjoy the sweetest comforts, how could the guileless boy hope to live, shorn of the crown that is his by every right and in the relentless grip of Rama in the flush of his wildest hopes

fulfilled? The lordly elephant, hunted by the dread monarch of the forest and at last under his merciless fangs, is a happier object. Now is your chance, if you would save your son from the clutches of his inexorable foe.

In the pride of your beauty and of your unbounded sway over the old monarch's heart, you have put slights innumerable upon Kausalya You have trampled upon her heart; you have lacerated her feelings ; and who but a fool will wonder if she wreaks dire vengeance upon you and yours, now that her son is resistless ruler over countless millions? I have spoken enough. The shouts of a nation's joy that crown Rama as the happy monarch of this broad and fair earth, its towns, its mountains, its forests and the seas that gird it round, those very shouts are the death-knell of your joys and hopes, pride and power; and your son falls with you. The sun that rises to see Rama seated on Dasaratha's throne rises also on the last day of Bharata's life on earth. Devise some means whereby you could seat your Bharata on his father's throne and immure your mortal enemy Rama in the dark depths of distant forests"

CHAPTER IX

The fall of Kaikeyi

NO one knew better the peerless qualities that adorned Rama; yet the high Gods, ever mindful of their interests, cast a veil over her eyes and she drank the words of the hunchback with greedy ears Fire flashed from her eyes at the thought of her proud self reduced to be the bond-maid of Kausalya. Long and hot she sighed and exclaimed "This moment will I drive Rama away from the haunts of men and place the crown on the head of Bharata Manthara! I know that your brain is keen and subtle; my son

must win the thrown and that now ; Rama should be eternally shut out from the succession to the throne; and I count upon you to find me a way to the accomplishment of my object."

Manthara had set her heart upon the ruin of Rama. Joy unspeakable filled her to find that she had won over Kaikeyi to her views.

" Here I have a plan ready to set Bharata on the throne. But I wonder you seek it of me. Have you forgot, or remembering well, do you pretend ignorance ? Perhaps, you prefer to hear of the welcome news from me. Well, hear it, since you wish it ; and having heard, give your best thoughts to it."

Kaikeyi precipitately rose from her bed and cried out " Bharata should get the throne by any means, fair or foul. Rama must never dream of it ; unfold a plan thereto."

"There took place of yore", said Manthara "Then a great war between the gods and the asuras. The gods had the worst of it and prayed your husband Dasaratha to assist them. The king marched south with his friends, and you with him, to the impenetrable forests of Dandaka where Sambara, the dolphin bannered asura, ruled from his city Vaijayanta. A mighty master of illusion was he, invincible of the gods. Time and oft he fought with Indra and in the darkness of night, his asuras despatched to hell those of the enemies who lay wounded during the day. Dasaratha fought with him long and fiercely ; and was sore wounded by the terrible weapons of the asuras. He lay in a deep swoon and helpless in his chariot, when you drove him to another part of the field and sought to bring him back to life and consciousness. But, the asuras pursued him even there and pierced him with their remorseless shafts again and yet again. And you took him from their midst to another place of safety. Dasaratha could not be enough grateful to

you for having rescued him twice from the jaws of death. He exclaimed in a transport of gratitude "Saviour of my life! I grant you two boons. Ask what you will have". You accepted it with joy and replied " "Nay", your gifts I reserve for season due;" and he assented thereto. Now, it was you that told me of this. Else what know I? My love for you has treasured it in the depths of my memory.

Make your husband put a stop to the hateful preparations that are afoot towards the coronation of Rama; put him in mind of the two boons you have of him; and use them to seat Bharata on the throne of the Kosalas and exile Rama to the woods for twice seven years. Why? Fourteen years are more than enough for Bharata to root himself in the affections of his subjects.

Hear me yet, while I direct you how to proceed. Daughter of Aswapati! Take yourself hence to the Chamber of wrath as if your heart was aflame against Dasaratha; wrap your shapely limbs in coarse robes, mean and soiled; lie there in dust and dirt; the moment he steps in sob as if your heart would break; raise not your eyes to his face; speak not to him; and our hopes are to be sure to be crowned with success. I know, for a truth, that you stand nearest his heart. For you he will jump into the blazing fire. For you he will gladly sacrifice his life · but he dare not say you nay; he dare not rouse your anger; he dare not look at your wrathful face. Sluggard! Gauge full well the full force and might of your marvellous beauty. Gold, gems, pearls and costly trifles he will lay at your feet; but, never, for a moment, turn your eyes to them. Recall to him the two boons he granted you during the dread battle. He is not a man to go back upon his word, and in *that* lies our hope. Let him clasp you to his breast and cry over and again 'I give you the two boons'; even then, rest not until he swears it by an oath he will not break; and then ask him to

exile Rama to the woods for fourteen years and to crown Bharata as ruler of Ayodhya. Rama absent from the kingdom for fourteen years, Bharata will grow in power and fame, win over the troops, the people and the treasure to himself and reign long and happily. At least wring from him a promise to banish Rama and the rest of our plan naturally succeeds. Out of sight, out of mind. The fickle people will very soon learn to forget their idol for the time. He will have none to befriend him. Your son, Bharata, would have suppressed his enemies and hold uninterrupted sway. By the time that Rama returns from the forest, the keen-witted Bharata would have won the hearts of his subjects ; surrounded by his friends and well-wishers, he would stand alone, firm-rooted. Now is the time to accomplish our purpose or never. Summon thy courage and skill to entrap the uxorious king and see that the preparations now afoot towards Rama's coronation are converted to the use of Bharata."

Kaikeyi religiously believed that the evil counsels of Manthara were the surest means of good to her and exclaimed with wild joy, even as a a young colt unbroken, " Manthara ! Hunchbacks are naturally keen-witted ; but you are, far and away, the first among them. Strange that I have been blind to your superior excellences till now! Millions call me their queen and vow eternal fidelity and devotion ; but, you and you alone are the sleepless watcher over my interests. You live but for my happiness. Dasaratha's black heart was till now to me a sealed book. Let be. I have set my eyes upon countless hunchbacks, mean, crooked and repulsive of appearance ; but your fair body is, by a freak of nature, deformed a little, I see not how it can take away anything from your natural beauty. A lovely lotus is none the less charming to the eye if the wayward gust bent it a little. Your chest and

shoulders are broad and deep ; your stomach, with its tiny whirl of a navel, hides itself from sight, out of very shame as it were ; round and firm are your breasts and thighs ; your face is radiant even as the spotless moon ; the little bells from your costly girdle chime most musically ; your knees are firm and well-set, while your feet are somewhat unnecessarily long ; your long and shapely thighs shine through the white silk that veils them. Like a she-swan you walk proudly before me. In that witching hump of yours lie in teeming confusion, wonderful foresight, strange plots, plans and schemes of evil, intricate wiles of kingly polity and arts of illusion, which even the dread Sambara would give his life to possess. Manthara ! here let me hang this gold necklet round your shoulders. Wait till Rama is exiled to the dark forests and my Bharata is placed on the throne ; wait till my purpose is accomplished and my heart is content ; and I shall case yon precious hump in beaten gold. The most fragrant sandal paste, prepared with the purest gold, shall be spread over your arms and breast. A rare and costly jewel, set with brilliants of divers hue shall hang on your brows. Gaily adorned and richly dressed, you shall move before me like a nymph of the skies. Lovely beyond compare, your face shall shame the radiant moon ; you will quell the pride and might of those that wish us ill and bring them to your feet. Countless hunchbacks blazing with gold and gems, shall wait upon you in turn."

Thus the mistress lauded to the skies Manthara, her bond-maid, who turned to Kaikeyi even as she lay reclined on the snow-white bed, like a blazing fire on the sacrificial altar, and exclaimed " Would you raise the dam when the swollen waters have emptied themselves to nothing ? Arise and bend yourself to the task before you. Away to the chamber of anger and await the foolish king."

The royal dupe swallowed the bait all greedily and

repaired to the sulkery, and her temptress with her. She was unspeakably proud of her unrivalled beauty ; she flung away from her costly necklaces, rare jewels and precious pearls and, like a golden statue, she threw herself on the bare earth with wide eyes of anticipated triumph. Manthara's spells lay heavy upon her and under their influence she cried, "Go, tell my royal father the happy tidings. 'Rama is exiled far away to the dreary woods. Our Bharata sits on the Ikshwaku throne. Or, Your daughter Kaikeyi journeyed to the dread halls of Yama even from the anger chamber. What care I for gold, gems and ornaments ? I draw my last breath when I see the hated Rama on the throne."

Manthara had not a particle of doubt now that her pupil was dead set on her nefarious purpose ; but, to make assurance doubly sure, she sent, as it were, a parting shot at Rama, cruel beyond expression and deadly. "If you allow Rama the least chance to get the throne, you condemn yourself and your son to countless years of woe and disgrace. Fair one ! stick at nothing to gain your object."

Kaikeyi was pierced through and through with the keen poisoned shafts of the hunchback's malice. She pressed her hands to her heart to calm the tumultuous surprise that arose in it when she thought "And he had the adaucity to do a thing which he knew I would not approve of !" She was furiously angry with him for having taken it upon himself to arrange for the coronation of Rama without asking her leave. "Go, tell my father 'Rama is doomed to wear out years of misery in the dark woods ; my Bharata rejoices in his royal power and glory' ; or 'Your daughter Kaikeyi hastened straight from the anger chamber to the mansions of Yama, the God of death.' If Rama is not to be banished from the kingdom, what care I for gold, gems, garlands, dresses, costly viands or perfumes ? My life were an intolerable burden to me."

So spake she, the cruel-hearted ; she flung away from her gay wraps and priceless gems and lay on the bare cold earth, like some lovely bird shot through the heart. Dark anger, ever widening, clouded her fair face ; stripped of of her gay attire, her necklets and diamonds, she lay, a prey to unreasoning grief, even as the starry sky over which the shadow of night draws apace, darkening the world.

CHAPTER X

The Uxorious Monarch

The wicked Manthara did her work but too well. Kaikeyi, an apt disciple, was now busy revolving the plot hatched by her maid. She saw her way to success in all its detail. "Manthara! you speak well ; and I shall do even as you will have me." Heaving hot sighs of wrath, she sank upon the ground like a fallen Naga damsel of the nether regions, or like a gay-plumed bird transfixed with the venomed dart of the hunter. Anon, the shadow of a doubt crossed her heart. "Do I win or lose?" She knit her fair brows in deep thought for a while ; and then saw her path to gain and glory clear to the very end. Manthara, her maid, was devoted to her interests and even more obstinately bent upon her purpose ; Kaikeyi's resolve filled her with wild joy ; and she saw Bharata seated on the throne of his father. Meanwhile, the daughter of Aswapati said to herself for the last time, "I win or die." Her face was black as a thunder-cloud with suppressed anger : wrapped in a single cloth, mean and soiled, she flung herself on the dust with her long hair in a single braid, even as it were the old serpent whispering into her willing ears unholy counsels. Like some sweet-

throated songster of the feathered tribe bereft of life, she lay in that dark chamber, strewed with her priceless ornaments that gleamed bright in the growing gloom, as if they were the glowing sparks thrown off from her blazing anger ; or like a bright star-lit night when the full-faced moon has retired behind her fleecy curtains of ever-fleeting clouds.

Now, Dasaratha, with thoughtful care, gave his last directions to his ministers about the solemn function of the morrow and, dismissing his audience, he withdrew to the apartments of Kaikeyi. " Rama's coronation was but suddenly resolved upon. My darling Kaikeyi cannot have been informed of it. I will be the first to bear the happy news to her." And, like the radiant moon plunging into a bank of grey clouds in a sky over which the cruel Rahu had begun to cast his dark shadow, he entered the fatal pile.

Parrots, peacocks, herons, swans and other birds, sweet to the eye or to the ear, roamed free over the place. Veena and lute, mridanga and flute, played soft music. Dwarfs and hunchbacks hurried hither and thither ; bowers thick with Champaka and Asoka, dotted the spacious gardens and curiously fashioned grottos ; seats and couches of wondrous workmanship lay around, with gold, silver and ivory inlaid. The trees bore fruit and flower through all the year, thanks to the gardener's skill and science. Now, you came upon tiny lakes hid beneath a bed of bright lotuses or lilies ; now, you lighted upon pleasant nooks and snug corners provided with every tasteful delicacy. Visions of heavenly loveliness flashed here and there in costly attire, lending to the place the air of the radiant halls of the Lord of the Shining Ones.

And through that spacious palace, rich with every thing that man can desire, Dasaratha passed on, like a mighty lion into his liar. He proceeded to where Kaikeyi used to await his arrival, but found her not there. The hour, the

music, the birds, the perfumes awoke in him hot desires and made him all the more eager to clasp Kaikeyi to his breast. His eye glanced rapidly over the vacant seat and turned to the chamberlain who stood by and flashed a question. "Where is Kaikeyi?" And, ere he could receive a reply, he abandoned himself to gloom and despair. "Never had my darling failed me thus. She knew the hour of my visit to her and would advance to meet me with a radiant smile, gaily attired. Never had I any occasion till now to come here to her rooms and miss her." Alas! He knew not that the devil has poisoned her innocent mind with wicked counsel and that she lay in wait for him resolved to carry out her cruel purpose at all costs. So, he asked again "Where has she gone, my Kaikeyi?" The officer trembled with fear and, with folded palms upon his head, managed to blurt out "Your Majesty! It is sometime since I saw the queen proceed in the direction of the anger chamber, the fire of wrath in her eyes." "Kaikeyi angry! Kaikeyi gone to the anger-chamber!" The words drove him remorselessly to the utter depths of despair; and his senses well nigh failed him.

He flew to the dark cell of Mourning and there beheld his heart's delight roll in the dust as one demented. Lovely beyond words, as some delicate creeper cut down to the earth; a sight to fill the beholders' hearts with amazement, even as some bright God hurled headlong from His Abode of Light on his merit's wane; enough to wring the hardest heart, even as some fair Kinnara nymph cruelly tortured by her enemies; gifted with indescribable charm and grace, as some Apsaras banished from heaven; with clouded lustre, even as some potent Illusion sent down on earth to lure the souls of men; motionless, as some doe caught in the strong meshes of the hunter, she lay writhing in her consuming grief, as a lordly she-elephant struck to the heart with a venomed dart.

MEMORIAL V. NARLA P. R. I. Acc. No.

The petted child of the ruler of the Kekayas, the favourite queen of King Dasaratha of Ayodhya, it was all unmeet for her to lie there thus, as some broken waif. The snows of sixty thousand winters lay heavy on Dasaratha; Kaikeyi was in the bright summer of her youth and loveliness. Dasaratha was the soul of righteousness; Kaikeyi had staked her all on the accomplishment of her devilish plot. Dasaratha was the dread lord of countless millions whose lives hung upon his breath; in his heart was gathered the experience and wisdom of sixty millenniums; but, his love for Kaikeyi blinded him to every thing and he could not bear to see her suffer so. Frank and guileless, her beauty clouded his clear intellect and he could not see that she was the rival that supplanted Kausalya, and was hence her bitterest foe. She was not fool enough to sit tamely and see Rama succeed to the throne of his father, when she had a goodly son and knew she could wind the old man round her little finger. Why seek for any deeper reason for her present outburst of grief and rage?

As some bull elephant soothes with soft trunk his mate whom the cruel hunter has shot down with poisoned shafts, Dasaratha fondly stroked his darling, saying to himself "What would she have? Is her fair frame racked by any fleeting pain? Or is it that she is displeased with me? I wish I knew what she would do". With trembling heart he looked upon the lotus-eyed siren and the fires of love and passion flamed in him anew. "Light of my eyes!" he cried "I know not any reason why I should fall under your displeasure. Is any fool weary of his life and slights you? Does any one seek the shortest path to the house of Death and puts an insult upon you? Here stand I innocent of any offence to you, your devoted slave; and you roll before me in the dust like one possessed of an evil spirit and bereft of her senses. It breaks my heart to see you suffer thus.

"Say, are you ill ? I have here in Ayodhya and elsewhere, countless doctors of medicine, the foremost of their craft, who are devoted to me body and soul, through favours received and honors conferred. Is it your wish that I send for them now ? They will, in a trice, keep away pain and suffering from you. But, if you are really angry, tell me the name of the miserable wretch who has dared to offend you. He shall suffer the tortures of the damned. Or, is it that some one has done you a service and you grieve that you have not repaid him ? I shall reward him beyond your expectations. Weep not. Let not senseless grief rack your fair limbs. What innocent man would you have me doom to death? What condemned wretch shall I set free? What beggar shall I make a prince ? What lord of riches shall I hurl into the gutter ? Be it anything that your heart may be set upon, know you not that I and mine are yours to command ? Can I bear to say you nay ? I hold my life of worth but to serve you and anticipate your least wish. It is a wonder to me that you can even harbour a doubt about my readiness to carry out your behests, knowing, as you do, my boundless love to you. You know better than others the extent of my power, energy, strength and wealth ; and yet I see you doubt my sincerity and ability to give you whatever you may wish for. This broad earth is mine to command, as far as the chariot of the sun courses. Gold, silver, pearls, gems, kine, corn, horses, elephants, shawls, wraps from Sindhu, Sauveera, Saurashtra, Vanga, Anga, Magadha, Matsya, Kasi and Kosala, east and south, what will you have ? Nay, give full reins to your desires Alas, that you should so soil your shapely limbs, rolling in the dust and dirt! What do you fear ? Tell me truly. I will not fail to remove it even as the rising sun burns up the morning dew ; and I swear it on the merit I have laid by till now."

Consoled somewhat by his promises, Kaikeyi resolved to pierce his loving heart with cruel words and set about to bind him by dreadful oaths.

CHAPTER. XI

THE FATAL BOONS

KAIKEYI bore in mind but too well the words of Manthara, 'Bind your husband by dreadful oaths and then make him grant the two boons'. She saw that the old king was under the influence of love and a slave to his passion ; he was ready to do anything for her. Surely it is but child's play for him to grant her wish and he, the supreme ruler of the broad earth and all it contains. "I am in the best of health," she replied "No one has put upon me any affront. Your numerous gifts and rare, I desire not. I have a certain purpose at heart which you, with your irresistable might to make or mar, alone could accomplish for me. If you are so minded, swear it so as I would have you ; and I speak to you the wish of my heart."

And Dasaratha wondered much. " Here am I to obey her least behest ; yet she asks me to swear. It is a very trifle for me to give her what she wants. Well, I thank the Gods that my apprehensions about her health or peace of mind are baseless." With a pleased smile, he raised her from the ground and laid her fair head on his lap, yearning to feast his eyes upon her loveliness. The madness of his love rose to a delirium ; he stopped not to consider what he said. His fingers aimlessly played with her silken tresses and he said "Fairest of all flesh on earth and justly proud of it ! My soul's one delight ! Know you any among women that are nearer my heart ? Who more welcome to my eyes than Rama, the best of men ? Would

you have me swear upon the peerless prince, invincible, noblest, best, the life of my life ? What shall I do for you ? I swear to accomplish your purpose and that on my Rama, whom if I see not for an hour, I die. I deem it a privilege and honor to be called upon to sacrifice my body, my life, Bharata and the other sons of mine, my dearest kin and what rest I have ; but I cannot live away from Rama. And by him I swear to fulfil your wish. I would sooner seek the dark realms of death than fail to do your bidding. Ponder well and you will see that my thoughts and words are in perfect unison ; speak out your wish and save me from grief and anxiety. I have said my say and leave you to act as seems best. You know the mighty spell your beauty has cast upon me ; you know my power to make or mar ; and think you it is charitable to suspect my good faith ? Once again I swear by every good and holy act I have done till now that I will accomplish your purpose at any cost."

Kaikeyi never forgot for a moment Manthara's counsel to anyhow secure the exile of Rama and the installation of Bharata. Her joy knew no bounds to see that her beloved son was sure to get the throne ; for, Dasaratha had sworn even as she would have him. He was in her toils. Her doting husband would not fail to see her wish realized at whatever cost and he had sworn it upon his darling Rama. So, she resolved to tell him of her cruel purpose ; even his bitterest foe would not have had the heart to wound him so ; but, she was but the God of Death in disguise that came to bereave him of his life. Then a doubt cast its shadow over her heart and she held herself back. "True, that the old dotard has sworn it strongly. But, my boon is no ordinary one. He may hear me out and, aghast at the utter cruelty and wickedness of my wish, may foreswear himself and say 'It is not in me to do as you will,'

Then my heart's hopes would be shattered." She resolved to bind him more securely to his word and exclaimed " Righteous king ! You have sworn by Rama and by your good acts that you will grant me the boons I may ask of you. If you speak true, I call upon the eternal witnesses to men's thoughts, words and deeds. Listen, ye gods, thirty-three crores in number ! Listen, the sun, the moon, the Akasa, the nine planetary Rulers, the night, the day, the quarters, the heavens, the earth, the Gandharvas, the Rakshasas, the creatures of the night, the household gods and all living beings! Here king Dasaratha swears to grant my wish ; and he is a speaker of truth, a warrior of immeasurable might, an adept in the mysteries of dharma. Lend me your ears carefully and witness his promise." She cast her powerful spells over Dasaratha of undimmed valor ; she bound him helpless in the toils of dharma ; and firmly convinced that, blinded by love and passion, he was ready to please her at any cost, she fixed the feeble-minded king with her eyes and said " My lord ! Let me recall to your memory an incident of the far past. During that terrible battle at night with Sambara the Asura, he wounded you sore and you fainted right away. Then, I kept my head and perilled my life to drive you safe to a distant part of the field. I spent the livelong night by your side and brought you back to life and light. I hope you have not forgotten it. You were pleased to grant me two boons ; but I kept them with you until some likely season. Lord of the measureless expanse of the earth ! Soul of truth ! I pray you grant me the two boons. But, having once passed your righteous word to grant me the boons, if now you go back upon it, rest sure I will not survive that indignity. I will even tear my heart by the roots."

It needed not all these solemn asseverations and

preliminary vows. Like the foolish deer of the forest that is charmed by the sweet music of the hunter and is hopelessly caught in the fatal net, Kaikeyi's words had already enslaved him quite. And in his eagerness to convince her of his boundless love, he cried "Enough! Have you not my word that I grant your two boons whatever they might be? And why hesitate?"

Alas! He was little aware of the great misery that lay in store for him; he saw not the shadow of death creep upon him slowly but surely. Kaikeyi observed him keenly and was convinced, beyond a doubt, that he was hopelessly intoxicated with her beauty and was wound up to the right pitch when he would do anything for her. She fixed him again with her eyes, and said in cold and cruel tones "I am about to ask you to grant me the two boons you promised of yore. Hear me with the utmost attention. My son Bharata shall be crowned as the heir-apparent to the throne with the very things prepared towards Rama's coronation. Mighty monarch! Now is my time to ask you to grant me the second of the two boons I had of you on the night of the dreadful battle between the gods and the asuras. Rama shall be banished to the dark forests of Dandaka for twice seven years and shall live the life of a recluse with matted hair and clad in deer-skin and the bark of trees. Look sharp. This very moment, my Bharata shall begin his rule as heir-apparent in undisturbed peace. This is the wish of my heart and you have sworn inviolably to realize it. I but ask you to perform what you promised of old and nothing new. Do I press upon you any unreasonable claim? Nay, I but ask because you are sworn to it. True, it is not every creditor that receives a welcome reception at the hands of him who owes him money; but, it is no blame of his. This very day I shall see Rama turn his back upon Ayodhya and take his way to Dandaka. King

of kings ! Keep your word and let me not call you a traitor to truth. Act so that you will save from eternal disgrace, the line of the mighty Ikshvakus in which you are born, the bright traditions of your forefathers from the beginnings of Time and last, not least, your duty as a king, in whose crown shines the brightest jewel of Truth. I have heard wise and holy men speak of Truth as the surest road and the best to the bright mansions of the Blessed hereafter".

CHAPTER XII

IN THE TOILS

KAIKEYI'S words fell like a thunder-bolt on Dasaratha's ears. He was bereft of consciousness and plunged in the depths of grief. " It is not in my Kaikeyi, of guileless heart, to oppose Rama's coronation and wound my heart so cruelly She was never known to talk thus. So, I cannot take it as a fact. Is it some horrid dream ? Nay, I sleep not, but am broad awake. Am I gone mad ? No, I see nothing tending thereto. Is it some flash of memory from far off births ? It cannot be. I see no reason why such a dread calamity should have befallen me even then. Or is it some insidious malady that has unhinged my brain ?" He thought long and earnestly over it, but was no nearer the solution. By a great effort, he shook off the numbness that was creeping over him. Pierced with the cruel shafts of Kaikey's words, his senses were confused, even as those of a fawn suddenly face to face with a tiger. He heaved hot sighs even as some venomous serpent whom the charmer had deprived of energy and motion. He sat there on the bare earth, a pitiable sight to see. " Fie ! Fie upon this miserable existence of mine !" cried he and fainted away from grief.

It was a long time before he came back to himself. Wild

fury possessed him to tear Kaikeyi limb from limb. An all-consuming fire flashed forth from his eyes as he turned to her and cried in a terrible voice, "Merciless wretch ! Black-hearted ! Savage destroyer of my fair line ! Incarnate sin ! What wrong have I or Rama done to you or to yours ? What foul fiend set you up to compass this great evil to Rama, who loves and reverences you even as he does his mother ? Well, I am a fool to blame *you* ; for, did I not invite this fate upon myself ? This broad earth holds none so foolish as to nourish in his bosom a glittering serpent of deadly venom ; but I mistook you for a virtuous daughter of a goodly house and took you to my heart ; and therein doomed myself to death and disgrace.

"The whole world proclaims, with one voice, the countless excellences of Rama What fault, what crime shall I impute to him to justify his banishment ? Kausalya, Sumitra, my wealth, my power, nay, my very life are not so very dear to me but I can put them away without a paug. But, the very idea of sending away Rama from my presence is utterly improbable—and he loves me above everything.

" The more I feast my eyes upon his fair face and godly beauty the more my senses reel with exquisite joy. I cannot dream of being away from him for a moment and live. The worlds may yet roll on sunless ; corn may yet grow to golden fruition unblessed by water ; but Dasaratha lives not without Rama, be he far or near.

" It is plain you have staked your life on this sinful venture. Enough ; stay your hand ere it is too late. Free yourself from the loathsome coils of this obstinacy. Look here. I entreat it with my head upon your feet. Have I not humbled myself enough ? Have pity now at least ; abandon your fell purpose. I wonder how you had the heart to plot this dreadful iniquity!

"May be you spoke thus to test my love and affection to

Bharata? Then you must but have asked the throne for your boy. Your prayer for the exile of Rama is utterly at variance with what you spoke of him time and oft ere now. 'Rama is older in righteousness and virtue than the sons of men ; hence I count him as my first-born. Bharata comes but next'. Said you not so? You then meant it to flatter my credulous vanity, or, moved for the time by Rama's devotion to you. You are in the grip of grief and fear ever since you heard of the approaching coronation of Rama;you have lent yourself to be played upon by evil hearted schemers ; you have sought the dark solitude of this anger chamber ; you wring my heart even unto death by your cruel obstinacy ; well, I see it all clearly that your fair words were no test of my feelings towards your Bharata.

" They say it prophesies the downfall of a noble line when some well-conducted member of it turns out all unexpectedly perverse and wicked. You were known even till now to love right and fear wrong ? But this sudden moral twist foretells some dire calamity to the line of Ikshvaku.

" I carry my memory as far back as I can, but cannot recall any occasion when your conduct towards me was any other but seemly and loving. Hence my perplexity and unwillingness to take your words in earnest. Girl ! Said you not over and again to me 'My Bharata is great in mind and heart; but Rama is his peer, nay, his master?" Your words stand witness to your thoughts. So, I cannot, I will not believe you now.

" How had you the heart to condemn, for twice seven dreary years to the lonely forests, Rama on whom virtue and fame shed their undimmed lustre ? I see in him no fault, not the slightest, that could justify his banishment from the kingdom. Brought up in the lap of luxury and happiness, flower-soft of limb, what hardened your heart to pray for his banishment to the forests ? I knew

you as one of righteous soul, shrinking from the least breath of sin. Where has that wholesome fear flown to ? You pray for Rama to be immured in the far off woods. Well, grant that I consent. But Rama is the darling of every object in creation ; and would they stand by and see him torn from them ?

"Rama was never known to fail, the slightest, in his devotion and service to you. Your Bharata stands far below him in that respect. Then, what do you see in your son to set him up over Rama ? You know too well that there is none other than Rama who will wait upon you with love and reverence and obey your lightest word. How had you the audacity to ask for his exile to the forests ?

"There are millions of women in my kingdom, old and young. Do I hear any one of them complain that Rama has soiled himself with some unworthy act or that his fair fame is dimmed thereby ? Again, there are thousands of men and women in this realm who work hard to earn their living. Do you hear any one of them traduce Rama or speak of him any baseless calumny? With a pure soul, Rama conciliates all creatures by his sweet thoughts, words and acts ; he draws their hearts to him by realizing for them their utmost wishes. His mind is ever centred in their welfare and has thereby won for him the Worlds of Light, even the highest. He is idolized by the poor and the needy, whose wants he relieves with a lavish hand. The great and the wise he wins to give him pious counsel by unparalleled devotion to them. Nay, he makes his bitterest foes traitor to themselves and fast friends of his by the mere flourish of his redoubtable bow. He is a hero unmatched in sweet sympathy, profuse charity, profound wisdom and resistless valour. Rare virtues vie with one another to crown him—truth, charity that secures a bright hereafter, stern restrain of the organs of sense and action, large gifts that win the

hearts of people, unwavering friendliness, purity of thought, word and deed, adaptibility, an open eye that sees into the mysteries of Being, and reverent service towards the elders and the teachers of Law. What madness possessed you with senseless hate to pray for his exile from the kingdom, and he godly in his attributes, radiant as a Maharshi and dearer to every object in creation than its very self ?

"He is ever known to be sweet spoken and gentle to every creature, man or beast ; and I, of all, should never dream of his speaking any thing that would cause me the slightest annoyance. What a miserable return do I make him for all his love and kindness to me ! I should earn your love at the cost of hopelessly wounding the heart of Rama, dearer to me than the light of my eyes. Whom have I to call upon to stand between me and evil but my Rama, adorned with patience, self-control, charity, truth, righteousness, gratitude, gentleness and a thousand other graces of mind and heart ? And *him* you would have me put away from myself !

'Kaikeyi ! I have lived long, too long on this earth ; Death opens its doors to me even now ; my age and misery will melt a heart of stone. A drivelling dotard, I but say my few words over and over. I can only pray you to have pity upon me. I swear to make you mistress of everything that this sea-girt earth boasts of ; I but entreat you to spare me Rama. Kaikeyi ! You are young, very young, nay, a girl ; yet, see me fold my trembling hands to you in supplication ; see me lay my hoary head at your feet in pitiful entreaty. Let Rama find in you a sure haven of refuge. Make me not an instrument of evil, a tool of wickedness. Let me not go upon my plighted word to Rama, to my friends and to my people."

Thus he raved on, consumed with grief and fainted quite ; recovered himself after a time ; staggered like one

suddenly hit; remembered that the hour was drawing nigh when he would have to part from Rama, and overwhelmed with sorrow, he entreated her again to rescue him from a shameful death. But Kaikey's anger blazed forth all the more violently and she exclaimed in more pitiless accents if possible, "Oh, monarch! Were you present in an assembly of kingly sages like yourself and some one were to ask you casually 'Dasaratha! How did you discharge to Kaikeyi the heavy debt of gratitude for your life saved?', would you, well-conversant with the mysteries of duty, reply with a bold confidence? Would you be able to prove to them that you have kept your word to me? Or, would you rather say 'I owe my life to her, who risked hers to save mine. I granted her some boons in the transports of my gratitude; but, only to please a woman's heart. Of course, I made light of it when the poor fool took it all seriously and asked me to grant them I laughed in her face and sent her about her business'? Well, a nice figure you would cut among them! King of kings! How dare you grant me boons in the past and seek to perjure yourself now?

"Now, the members of a class do not stand alone, the good or evil that one does raises or drags down the others along with him. The world judges of the class by the individual. The kings of the world are eternally shamed in you

"May be you have heard that, once before, a dove threw itself on the protection of your ancestor Sibi to save it from a cruel vulture and the noble-hearted king offered his own flesh to the vulture to feed upon?, Again, Alarka, the royal sage, promised a holy Brahmana to grant him his wishes; and the blind suppliant wanted the king to give him his goodly eyes. And Alarka gave them all joyfully and won the bright worlds of the gods. Once upon a time, the gods prayed to the Regent of the Waters, 'Ocean-lord!

We would that you keep yourself within limits'; and the ocean has faithfully kept its word ever since. Thus have your noble ancestors lived out their ideals of duty. Would you seek to forget it? Would you foreswear yourself?

"Black-hearted deceiver! I am no dupe of yours. Know I not that you have set your heart upon crowning Rama all unjustly, that you might disport yourself with that hag Kausalya, day and night? Well, I care not to discuss with you whether the boons I ask are righteous or otherwise, true or false; I will hold you to your promise and compel you to perform it to the very letter. If Rama should sit on the throne of the Ikshwakus, I will, before they face, drink deadly poison and kill myself at your feet. Death has no terrors for me, but is a welcome friend, if I should ever see my hated rival Kausalya receive the homage of the people, be it for a day. For, dare you deny that I am an infinitely greater source of joy and happiness to you than that horror? Once more I swear a dreadful oath by myself and by my darling Bharata. My heart knows not peace nor content unless I see Rama driven to the forests." She wrapped herself in cold contemptuous silence and turned a deaf ear to Dasaratha and his passionate entreaties.

The words "Rama should be exiled to the forests; Bharata should be crowned as king" fell upon the wounded heart of the poor king like drops of molten lead. For a while he sat with dazed senses, stupidly silent. Anon, he stared bewildered at his wife, whose love and affection till then were strangely transformed into merciless hate and cold heartlessness. Her words pierced his heart like the sharp Vajra of Indra and left him a prey to cruel grief and sorrow. He recalled her fierce obstinacy of purpose and the dreadful oaths she had bound him by; and with a heartrending cry "Oh, Rama!" he fell to the ground like a monarch of the forests struck by lightning. He seemed like a person

of unsettled mind ; or one struck with sudden madness ; or like one whose very nature has undergone a thorough change under the influence of some fell disease ; or like a strong man in the cruel grip of an unknown malady ; or like some mighty serpent drained of its power and energy by potent spells.

Next, he turned to Kaikeyi in abject humility and said " Girl ! Let me know at least who implanted in your innocent heart this wicked thought that flatters your hopes of self-interest. Has some malignant demon taken possession of your soul that you speak to me all shamelessly ? You were but a slip of a girl when I married you ; and how could I see through your fair face into the black heart behind ? Now that you have grown in years, your nature asserts itself. Whom do you fear that you guard yourself so carefully by these boons ? If you have the least desire to do that which would gladden the heart of myself, your lord and husband, of every object in creation, nay, even of your darling son Bharata, put away from you this unholy resolve. Your mean heart is doubtless a legacy of the great sins perpetrated in past lives. Hence, I wonder not that you are resolved to work this evil to Rama and exile him from the kingdom. I am a fool to expect your dark soul to be illumined by the faintest ray of pity or sympathy. But, search as you may, you can never bring up anything against me or against Rama to justify your grief or displeasure.

My only consolation is that you will never see your heart's hopes fulfilled. All your labour and trouble, this mighty load of sin that you so sedulously accumulate, the wrath, the hate and the curses of god, man and beast will be your faithful companions for ever and you will have nothing to show in return. Fool ! Know you not that Bharata remains in Ayodhya only if Rama graces it ; Bharata will find it a hell if Rama is not there. Surely, Bharata is not a

wit behind Rama in his knowledge or observance of duty. So, I will divide this kingdom equally among my children; or I shall give it to Bharata. All that I entreat of you in return is that Rama may be allowed to cheer my last hours on earth. But should you deny me this reasonable request, rest assured that your hopes will turn to ashes in your mouth. And you would have gained nothing except the doubtful pleasure of having tortured me to death.

"The cruel words 'Betake thyself to the gloomy forests' would fall upon the ears of Rama and dim the lustre of his fair face even as the moon in the grip of Rahu; and shall I look upon it and yet live? I have made this resolve to crown Rama, not out of any sudden freak or individual caprice or predilection, but have taken deep and earnest counsel with my ministers, friends, subjects, brother-kings, Brahmanas and sages. I have discussed the question in all its bearings. I would rather look on while my foes slaughtered my soldiers than stand by and allow your obstinacy to ruin my well-concerted plan. What would they think of me, my guests, the kings whom I have invited from the four quarters of the earth? I should not be surprised if they exclaim 'This Dasaratha is but an idiot. Sixty thousand years have passed over his head without his being any the better for it. It is but blind chance has kept him on the throne till now.'

"What do you expect me to reply to the numerous men, women, children and persons hoary in years, knowledge and experience, when they ask me a few hours hence 'What has become of Rama? Why does not his coronation come off?' Shall I face them with a virtuous look and say 'I had promised Kaikeyi two boons in the past and in consequence, have fulfilled them by banishing Rama to the forest and crowning Bharata instead?' But any one of them would naturally turn back upon me and say 'How

about your promise *to the world* that you would instal Rama to day as the heir-apparent ?'

" When I have sent away Rama to the woods, Kausalya his mother, would very natuarally ask me 'Lord! May I know wherein my son hath offended you ? What reply do you expect me to give her after the cruel wrong I have done her ? What a noble woman that ! She waits upon me as any humble bond-maid, sweetly unconscious of her high estate as the queen of this realm. Now, she is the best and pleasantest of friends during my hours of recreation. Again, she is an ideal wife when discharging with me some moral or religious duty, putting away from her the pride and haughtiness of a queen. Should I take myself other wives, she does not feel jealous or aggrieved in the least, but treats them with more than sisterly affection. No mother watches over her favorite child with more anxious solicitude than Kausalya, where my bodily comforts were concerned. She is ever intent on anticipating my slightest wish, and even Rama occupies but a secondary place in her heart. Ever soft and gentle of speech, she, my first love and my eldest queen, is disgracefully neglected by me and all because I am coward enough fear to to displease you. The love I have showered upon you has produced but bitter hate towards me ; my favours, my gifts and my benefits have turned into so many scorpions for you to lash me with. Now that you have thrown off the mask and stand in your naked wickedness, my folly comes back to roost ; and I suffer even as an invalid who gratifies his palate with forbidden and unhealthy delicacies. A quenchless fire rages in my heart when I come to think of my owlish stupidity.

" Sumitra, on whom I have never bestowed a thought of love or concern, will rightly be terrified at this atrocious act of mine and ever after shun me as a plague ; for, her turn may come at any moment to suffer at my hands.

"Alas! The word 'Dasaratha is dead; Rama is banished to the forests' would fall upon the ears of Seeta simultaneously like a bolt from the blue. Deprived of her husband and myself, she will seek swift refuge in death, even as a faithful Kinnara lady of the Himalayas, torn from the arms of her mate. And do you expect me to survive the shock of Rama's banishment and Seeta's hopeless despair? Rama and myself will begin our journey at the same moment, he to the gloomy forest and I to the halls of Death. You would look well in your widow's weeds, holding undisputed sway over this happy realm. What an absurdity to even dream that I could see Rama leave my side and yet live! As a glutton who deceived by its golden glitter quaffs with zest the poisoned cup, and writhes in agony later on, I took you to wife, deceived by your fatal beauty into the belief that you were a model of virtue and wifely devotion. And now that a chance has offered itself, you have boldly thrown off the disguise and shown yourself in your native wickedness of heart and faithlessness of purpose. Your insidious flattery enslaved my heart and made me over to you, bound hand and foot. I know that it will not be long before you sacrifice my life to your dark ambition, even as the cruel hunter who snares the unwary feet of the deer by his fatal music. A saintly Brahmana who has suddenly taken to drink would not be a greater object of abhorrence to men than Dasaratha, who sold his eldest son into bondage to please a woman's caprice; every righteous man in this kingdom would point the finger of scorn at me and that all justly. My name will be a byword of reproach and shame in town and village. Never have I experienced such a misery in this sixty thousand years of my existence. As the thoughts, words and deeds of a man shadow him faithfully from birth to birth, even so have the two boons I granted you in the far-off past found me out now and to my cost.

"Ah ! woe unspeakable ! A wretched sinner, I have clasped to my bosom through these live-long years, all ignorantly, a very fiend in human shape. I knew not that I had taken Death into my house. I preserved with pious care the rope that is to be my halter now. Far and near did I seek for my Fate; I invited it, an honor'd guest, to my house; I lavished all my love and affection upon it; I had no eye for any other; no honor was too high for it, no service too low for me; and the end is near, when my guest will redden my hearth with my heart's blood. Alas ! I have passed countless years by your side in innocent playfulness, all unaware that you were but sharpening the dagger that would one day be sheathed in my heart. As a babe that caresses the terrible fangs of a cobra, I have been fondling you all along. Well do I deserve that every object in creation should spit at me in scorn and cry out, 'Dasaratha is in his second childhood. He is an impotent slave to his ill-placed love. Who but that dotard would exile to the forests his eldest son and best, dowered with all graces of body, mind and heart, and all this to win a smile of a faithless woman'? My noble hearted son is driven away from the kin dom like the meanest orphan.

"I mortified myself by keeping the Kanda vratas, by strict observance of the vows of Brahmacharya and by rendering humble service to my teacher; I exercised a stern and sleepless control over my senses and mind. Yet, when I entered the life of a householder, a woman's beauty shattered all that I had built up and brought shame and misery upon me.

"I have but to say 'Rama! Take yourself away from this kingdom to the dark forests,' and he will gladly reply 'Even so, my liege.' Not a word of expostulation, not a murmur of complaint. Would that he obeyed me not! It may seem all undutiful ; but nothing would please me better. But, alas !

I know he will never do it. He is the soul of candour and but sees his reflection in mine. He will take my order of banishment in dead earnest and obey it to the very letter.

"Man, bird and beast will shrink from me with abhorrence and disgust when I send Rama upon his sad journey. 'Fie upon the fool! Fie upon the hoary dotard! Fie upon the sanctimonious villian!' would be the universal cry. Ah, how can I live it through? Hell and its horrors wait for me on the other side. Well, you have tasted blood; and what new devilry are you hatching against others near and dear to me, now that you have driven Rama away from here? Rama's departure to the forests will be followed by Kausalya's death; Lakshmana goes with Rama; Satrughna is ever with Bharata; and Sumitra deprived of Kausalya, myself, Rama and her sons, will die of a broken heart. So, live on long years of power and joy with the pleasant consciousness of having plunged into the deepest and darkest hell of sorrow and grief, Kausalya, myself, Sumitra, and your step-sons I have but to turn my back on this life and Rama on this city, and this glorious line of Ikshvaku will fall amidst wild confusion—invincible till now, graced with fame, glory and virtue and rooted in the far past.

"If Bharata's heart be inclined in the least towards this hellish scheme of exiling Rama, I leave my curse to him and he shall not render me the last offices with his hands steeped in innocent and noble blood Base of heart! Sworn enemy! Does your heart rejoice? Have your hopes borne fruit? Foul murderess of your confiding husband! Place the ban of exile upon Rama and lord it over this kingdom in widowed pomp, you and your precious son Bharata. You are a cruel devil in woman's guise; unparalleled infamy will be my portion through you; the meanest object that crawls the earth will shrink from me with unutterable loathing; my very sight would be an insult to every

pure-hearted person ; but, you, the living incarnation of sin, crime and infamy, rule in my place. Rama, my darling boy, has been accustomed to stately horses, elephants, chariots and other royal conveyances. How could he trudge with weary feet through the thorny wilds ? Culinary experts, graced with ear-rings, would compete with one another to prepare daintiest delicacies for Rama and serve him with zealous care. And how is he to subsist on wild roots, berries and tasteless wood-land fare ? Costly beds of softest swan-down, hid beneath thick layers of delicate flowers of sweet fragrance, would invite him to deep repose and happy dreams; dressed in gorgeous robes of rare texture, he would recline thereon, while bards, minstrels, singers and story-tellers vie with one another to amuse or lull him to sleep How shall he, clad in deer-skin and bark of trees, rest his weary limbs on the bare earth, rough with thorns and pebbles, while the night-ranging creatures of the forest roar and howl in their savage ferocity ?

"I wonder whose wicked heart hatched this scheme to crown Bharata and send Rama a homeless wanderer on earth ? This hellish plot, undreamt of by any till now, must have proceeded from a brain of more than diabolical ingenuity. Shame upon womanhood ! Alas ! Fool am I to revile them indiscriminately. Bharata's mother, demon incarnate, alone deserves the reproach. Black-hearted snake with a glittering skin ! Ever bent on having your own way, careless of what hearts you trample upon ! Marvellous heart that no ray of pity illumines ! You find most exquisite delight in watching my frenzied agony under your devilish tortures. Tell me once again what crime or fault you charge myself with or Rama, who ever seeks your highest good and happiness. Alas ! My Rama in the grip of misfortune and calamity is a sight potent enough to unhinge the brain and the heart of every object in creation.

Parents will readily desert their children; wives will cut the throats of the husbands who love them as their very life; and all creatures will fall upon you in uncontrolled fury. A Deva of the heaven-world is not more graceful and handsome than my Rama in his unadorned beauty. Robes, gems and decorations but heighten its effect. Let me console myself by imagining his exit from this Ayodhya with the lordly gait of an elephant in rut. Alas! It is not given me to behold it with these eyes Ah! Would I not then cast away from me this heavy burden of sixty thousand years and rejoice again in youth, strength and beauty?

"It is no wonder if my life-breaths follow Rama to the forest. There might be life and motion on a sunless earth; plants and trees may grow and flourish without the life-giving showers of Indra; but, it is utterly impossible to keep away death from those who witness Rama's departure to the forest (friends or strangers).

"You pray for my death; you wish me no good; you are my relentless foe; you are my Fate; long and fondly did I cherish you; I gave the warmth of my bosom to this venomed Death, all deluded, and it has fastened its deadly fangs into my heart. You and your precious Bharata do well to redden your hands in the blood of me and mine. Rejoice in the prosperity of my foes and hold sway over this town and kingdom, widowed of me, of Rama and of Lakshmana.

"Cruel fiend that pierces a broken heart! You have dared to speak to me thus, all unmindful of the wifely reverence you owe me! What keeps your wicked tongue from shrivelling up? Why do not your cruel fangs fall out of your head, split in a thousand pieces? Rama never knows what it is to speak a cruel word or unkind to any. He has a pleasant word for everybody; there is not one but sings his

praise high ; and you alone enjoy the unenvied notoriety of seeing a blemish in his spotless character.

"Foul smircher of the fair fame of Kekaya's house! I care not if black Despair swallows you ; I defie your puny wrath; seek not to frighten me with your death ; shiver to atoms and be sucked into the patient Earth ; I refuse to be your dupe and give my sanction to this suicidal plot. Sharp and merciless as a razor ! Base flatterer ! Your wickedness is something unspeakable ; you are born to ruin your fair house ; you have fastened your brazen talons in my heart's roots. I crave no greater boon than your sudden death ; and alas ! God denies me that.

"I see Death beckons me yonder. What joy in life when you have torn me from the side of Rama ? And should I live, what have I for you but unutterable hate ? No, spare me your refined cruelties yet a while. See, I lay my proud head at your feet and entreat you all humbly. "Cast an eye of pity on me". Poor Dasaratha was, to all the world, a proud Emperor ; yet he was the abject slave of his wife. His boundless love for her had bound him and delivered him over into her hands. Like a masterless man, he raved all plaintively. It ill became one of his years and rank to say "I pray for your death ; I entreat you with my head at your feet Hast no pity on me ?" He bent down and groped aimlessly to clasp her feet, as she stretched them in utter shamelessness. But his tortured limbs would bear him no further ; and like an uprooted tree, he fell at her cruel feet, striving hard to reach them.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE TOILS—*(continued)*

WHAT had Dasaratha done to deserve such a fate? Stretched on the bare earth he lay, even as the emperor Yayati, whom the inexorable gods hurled down to the earth, when his waning merit gave him no place in Heaven. But, Kaikeyi, Sin incarnate, was furious at the delay; she snapped her fingers at her husband and at the world, and devised fresh forments to make him work her will. "Ideal monarch! Loud you brag of your strict adherence to truth; you never go back upon your word; but you would be my debtor for the two boons granted of yore."

It took some time for the poor king to recover from the shock; he turned upon her with wild fury and cried "Mean wretch! Tireless foe! Drink my heart's blood; drive my godly Rama to live with savage beasts; reach the goal of your hopes and rejoice therein. Should the bright gods ask me on high 'Dasartha! You bent yourself to a foolish woman's whim; you bartered away for her fickle smile your eldest son, whose rare virtues you have buried in the dark woods. What put you up to perpetrate such wickedness', where shall I hide my disgraced self? Shall I say 'I banished Rama from the kingdom to fulfil my promise to Kaikeyi?'. That would be the truth of it. But, would they not reply 'What of your plighted word to the world and to Rama?' Alas! I have broken it, all basely. Woe and misery in this world and eternal infamy in the other, is all I have gained by condemning Rama to a cruel exile.

"Sixty thousand years did I moan and wail for an heir to rule after me. Vows, penances, mortifications, offerings, charity, sacrifices did I perform and observe past count and

held myself fortunate in being blessed with the heroic Rama as my son. And him, my darling, you want me to doom to a life of misery! How could I harden my heart to do it!

" Rama is the bravest of the brave; there is not a science nor an art he has not mastered; he has put away wrath and shames the very Earth by his sweet patience. How shall I give my consent to drive him away from the haunts of men to consort with wild beasts, my lotus-eyed Rama? Dark-hued, even as the tender lily; long-armed, iron-jointed, supple-sinewed, of immense strength, he is the idol of all creatures. And may my tongue blister if I speak to my darling child the words 'Bury yourself in dark Dandaka.' My eyes shall rot ere they behold my Rama of peerless intellect undergo pain and misery; for, who more deserving of joy and comfort than he? No greater happiness do I crave for at the hands of the Gods than to die before I stain my soul with this iniquity. Oh thou, crueller than a fiend let loose from hell! Oh thou, whose heart revels in wrecking the joy and happiness of others! Why do you desire to bring this calamity upon Rama, this exile to the woods, trampling upon the feelings of the whole world? Is his unfailing valour nothing in your eyes nor my boundless affection for him? Alas! infamy and disgrace will dog my name to the end of all time."

The sun set upon the pitiable sight of a weak old man, the lord of the earth, yet raving as one demented. Merciful Night cast her dark pall over it. The moon, as she rode in the heavens during three watches of the night, was an eyesore to Dasaratha; the winged Hours seemed to his sorrowful heart leaden-footed. He contrived to pass through the agelong night like one stricken with an incurable malady, heaving deep sighs and hot. He fixed his tearful eyes on the sky and called out to it in heart-rending lamentations. "Star bedecked Queen of night! Have pity on me and continue

ever ; nay. I ask it of you with joined palms of prayer. Why ! Not so ; I am powerless to flee from the presence of this hated Kaikeyi. But, if it dawns, my subjects will seek me out and I will be relieved of the sight of my mortal enemy. Hence, merciful night ! Haste thee on the wings of thought and usher in the welcome dawn. I would give anything to be saved the cruel torment of being forced to look upon the author of my woe."

Anon, his thoughts wandered to another point and he stood before Kaikeyi with clasped hands of entreaty, seeking to turn her from her purpose.

"Girl ! The world knows me till now as god-fearing and right-principled ; I am on the confines of life and may pass beyond at any moment ; I am wounded to the heart ; you are my only hope. Besides, am I not your lord and king, to whom you owe reverence and allegiance ? I have made you what you are, the favorite queen of the ruler of Kosala. Let these things weigh with you in granting me my prayer.

" None were with us when I gave you the two boons You may drop them now and not incur the displeasure or ridicule of any. But my promise to Rama is far otherwise. In full audience have I passed my word to the kings from the four quarters of the globe, to saintly Rishis and holy Brahmanas and to the millions of my subjects. 'I crown Rama king on the morrow.' If I break my pledge to them, how would I stand in their esteem ? You are but a girl and some intriguer may have put you up to this obstinacy. Let be ; I pass it over. But grant me my prayer. The earth holds none so dear to me as your lovely self of witching eyes. I crave your pity for Rama. True, the kingdom is yours by right of boon granted—to rule or give away. But, pray make a gift of it to Rama, at least out of compassion for a poor old beggar like myself. May Rama live long to rule over this realm and bless the fair donor every moment of his life.

Thus you will earn undying fame in the world of men and high merit among gods. O lady of shapely thighs and charming looks! It is but a trifle for you to do. But, you win my life-long gratitude; you confer a great happiness on Rama; the whole world will acclaim your praises, while great and good men will hold you in high esteem. 'But, it will so disappoint my Bharata'? Is it what holds you back? Nay, he is the soul of nobility and justice; he sets no bounds to his love for Rama; and nothing will gladden his heart more."

Thus he tried many an argument and appealed to every possible weakness of hers. Alas! His heart was open as the day; her heart was blacker than hell. His eyes were red and weary with grief and sleeplessness; her eyes were redder, if possible, through rage and grief at being disappointed. Tears rolled down his aged cheeks every time he thought of the moment that was to part him from Rama; she wept hot tears of grief to think that her beauty and wiles had not enslaved him sooner. He stormed, he raged, he entreated hard enough to melt the heart of an iron statue and moved heaven and earth to loosen her cruel grip; she brought into play every art, every wile, every stratagem that a cunning woman's brain could devise; she cooed, she froze, she preached, she philosophised, she cut and thrust to bend him to her will. And she turned a deaf ear to all his entreaties, expostulations, prayers and tears; for, the high gods had hardened her heart and sharpened her cruel nature. Dasaratha fainted beneath the shock and came back to himself after a time. "Is this she on whom my heart's affections have been centred? Is it that self-same Kaikeyi, the faithful wife, the guileless heart? Nay, this utter callousness to my prayers and entreaties, this inhuman obstinacy, this cruel cutting speech can never be she"; and he gazed at her long and earnestly, as at some frightful

wonder. All at once, his thoughts turned towards the moment that was even then on him, when he would have to part with his darling son, and condemn him to a living death; and he fainted right away Thus the noble-hearted king passed the live-long night, heaving hot sighs of impotent rage and unavailing grief.

"And when the pale and bloodless East began
To quicken to the sun ... ..."

Conch, veena, tabor, bards, minstrels, heralds, and pursuivants recalled their mighty lord in sweet strains and sweeter words to the duties of the new day; but Dasaratha curtly bade them cease.

CHAPTER XIV

KAIKEYI'S TRIUMPH

THE pitiful sight of her lord and husband beside himself with poignant grief at being torn away with violent hands from the side of his son and writhing in the dust and dirt, made not the slightest impression on her sinful heart. It was nothing to her that he was a puissant emperor of the glorious house of Ikshvaku. She never wavered from her fell purpose, but struck at him again and again. "A fine king truly! He is profuse in his promises and grants any boon I may desire; and now he holds back, a pitiful sinner to truth and virtue. I cannot, for my life, conceive what makes him roll there on the ground as if he were called upon to make a great and sudden sacrifice. Here sir! Bear you in mind that you have to keep your promise to the very letter. Truth is the highest dharma, thus say those who have sounded its depths. I do but ask you to act consistantly with dharma in its noblest form of fulfilled faith. King Sibi, your noble ancestor, once passed his word to a

vulture and gave his flesh for it to feed upon and won the Worlds of Light. Alarka, the royal sage, promised a learned Brahmana to grant him anything he might ask for. 'Give me sight; give me your eyes' said the strange petitioner. And Alarka gladly deprived himself of his eyes to keep his plighted word. The lord of the ocean will find it no difficult task to break his bounds; yet, he never dreams of it, bound by a promise he had made to the suppliant gods. The supreme Brahman, the goal of all aspirations and efforts, finds no higher manifestation than Truth. Dharma flourishes in the rich soil of Truth. The eternal wisdom of the Vedas teaches nothing higher than Truth. It is the surest means to realize our farthest hopes. And if there glows in you any spark of a desire to lead a life of dharma, hold fast to Truth. Do you not rank yourself among the good and the great of the world? Is it not your proud boast that none sought your presence in vain? Then, let not my boons go to waste. Banish Rama to the woods and earn a more righteous fame. Grant the earnest prayer of one whom you hold next your heart. Once, twice and thrice do I warn you. If you heed it not and put insult and slight upon me, my blood be upon your head."

Thus did Kaikeyi goad him on, every moment surer of her triumph, while the poor king vainly strove to free himself from the bonds of his plighted word, even as Bali, the Asura, struggled impotently to cast off the noose thrown round him by the Lord Vishnu when he came down on earth as Upendra. Helpless and confused as a bull prisoned between the yoke and the wheels, with woe-begone face and lack-lustre eyes, he groped and staggered awhile as one bereft of sight. But, his pride as a warrior-king of the line of Ikshvaku and his keen natural intelligence came to his rescue. With a mighly effort, he calmed himself and

put on a bold front. "Sinful wretch!" cried he, "Here do I fling away from me that cursed hand which I grasped in holy wedlock when the priests chanted the sacred texts over us and the bright god of Fire bore witness to the solemn rite. Here do I put away from me once for all the wicked offspring of that marriage. The pale shades of Night flee in wild tumult before the fiery arrows of the lord of Day. The sages and the Brahmanas are even now at my doors, whipping up my laggard spirit to hasten the coronation of Rama. Well, it is a very congenial piece of work to do, quite in your line; you can utilise the very materials brought together for Rama's coronation to perform my funeral obsequies. If you raise a barrier between my people and their wishes, neither you nor your precious son shall offer with your sinful hands any libations of water to my manes. My eyes are grown accustomed to see the countenances of my people blossom with the anticipated joy of Rama's coronation; how shall I bring myself to behold the very same people with downcast looks and gloomy faces?"

The moon and the stars paled in sorrow to hear the old king's lament and despairing, as it were, of doing him any good, left him far behind and passed on. A happy night it was in a way, and holy in that the forlorn father, albeit grievously wounded to the heart, was ever kept in remembrance of Rama. Kaikeyi viewed the glad morn with envious eyes; of infinite suppleness and adaptability, she changed her tactics and turned upon the stricken king with redoubled fury. "Your words cause me unendurable agony, even as some dire malady poison-bred. This moment you shall send for Rama. Wound not my feelings deeper. Place my son on the throne; banish Rama to the woods; see me clear through all opposition; and keep your sworn faith to me."

Even as some lordly elephant struck deep with the

sharp goad, Dasaratha writhed beneath the cruel words of winged venom and cried "Woe is me! The bonds of Dharma crush my heart and I must even keep my word to this she-devil. Alas! My senses desert me and I know not what to do. Yet, I would see my Rama once again ere he quits his unnatural father."

Day broke; the Sun beamed on his children; the auspicious hour fixed for Rama's coronation drew near. The saintly Vasishtha, the mirror of all perfections, human and divine, entered the city and his disciples in his wake, with everything ready for the solemn rite. The roads were neatly swept, well watered and strewn thick with fragrant flowers. Bright flags and lofty bannerets waved from every house. Garlands and gay arches spanned the streets at close intervals. The stores and shops were invitingly open, rich with rare products of nature and art. Groups of happy men and women were scattered over the roads and squares, eagerly discussing the all-absorbing subject. Rare and costly perfumes rolled in heavy waves in the morning breeze. The sage had his bath in the holy Sarayu; his prayers said, he now took his way to the royal palace through the fair city that cast into shade the capital of Indra. Brahmanas, citizens, provincials and experts in sacrificial lore that had an honored seat before the king, all awaited the presence of Dasaratha. He left them behind and reached the seraglio, when he espied Sumantra, the charioteer, coming out of it. Vasishtha stopped the king's confidential adviser and said "I leave it to your keen intelligence to announce my presence here to his Majesty. Vessels of gold filled from the bosom of the ocean and from Ganga's sin-cleansing wave, a beautifully-carved seat of Udumbara wood, every kind of seed, perfumes, gems, honey, curds, clarified butter, fried rice, holy grass, flowers, milk, eight winsome damsels, an elephant in rut, a chariot and four, a magnificient sword, a

bow, palanquins, a moon-white umbrella, fleecy chowries, a gold vase inlaid with precious stones, a bull of spotless white graced with garlands of gold, a noble lion with four fangs, a horse of immense strength and energy, a throne spread with a tiger-skin, sacrificial fire, instrumental music, courtesans, priests, Brahmanas, cows, sacred animals and birds—all are ready against Rama's coronation. Citizens, provincials, heads of clans, the crafts and guilds with their Masters, royal visitors and the common folk call down sweet blessings on the head of Rama and look forward to the happy moment of his coronation The day has begun ; the auspicious star and moment draw apace ; and Rama is to be consecrated to his high office even then. Go, hasten his Majesty."

Sumantra returned to the seraglio, singing aloud the praises of the king. He was a very dear friend to Dasaratha; old in years and virtue, he had free access to the women's apartments; and the wardens there passed him through them unquestioned. He was utterly ignorant of the wretched plight in which his royal master was; he drew near the curtains and with joined palms of reverence, began all innocently to sing the praises of his lord and master, in apt and well-chosen terms.

"The Lord of Waters overflows with joy when he sees his radiant friends, the Sun and the Moon, rise on the horizon. Rise thou on our horizon and gladden our hearts. It was at this moment that Matali, the charioteer of Indra, lauded high his celestial master and inspired him with joy and energy to triumph over the Danavas ; even so do I, your charioteer, venture to sing your praises no less high and rouse you to joy and victory. The Vedas, the Vedangas, Sciences and Arts rouse Brahma, the Demiurge, to his duties, and I announce to your Majesty the dawn of a new day and its attendant duties. The Sun and the Moon gently break

upon the slumbers of the tired Earth ; even so do I seek to call you back from the realms of sweet sleep. May it please your Majesty to come forth. Dressed in the gorgeous robes of state as befits the day of Rama's coronation, sail into our horizon in all your glory and splendour, like the Sun on the golden mount Meru. May the Sun, the Moon, Siva, Kubera, Varuna, Agni, Indra and the other Lords of the Shining Ones crown your arms with success. The happy night has drawn to an end and has ushered in the happier day when all beings will rejoice to see Rama's brows adorned with the crown of the Ikshvakus. Your commands have been joyfully carried out to the very letter and it behoves your Majesty to brighten us with your presence and direct us further. Every thing is ready towards the coronation rite. Citizens, provincials, merchants, Brahmanas and many others await your Majesty's arrival and I came to announce the saintly Vasishtha I pray you give immediate commands to begin the happy function of the day. Your subjects yearn for the sight of your royal countenance, even as the herd without their leader, the armies without their general, the night without its queen, or the cows without their bull." So sang Sumantra, eager to please his monarch and congratulate him on the happiness that was in store for him ; but, his words fell like so many drops of molten lead on the bleeding heart of Dasaratha. The righteous king, in the midst of his splendour and power, was a pitiable sight, with swollen eyes, red with weeping. He sent back a plaintive reply. "Sumantra! Your words do but lacerate a heart already tortured beyond words."

Sumantra stood aghast and bending his looks at the wan face of his friend and master, he bowed with low reverence over his joined palms, and withdrew in silence. But Kaikeyi, ever watchful of her interests, as became the daughter of a king, was furious with Dasaratha for not having

ordered Rama into his presence. She called back Sumantra and said, "Friend Sumantra! His Majesty has passed a sleepless night talking over the happy event afoot to-day. He was sleeping even as you came in. Speed to Rama's palace and bring him here as quickly as you can. Delay not, but look sharp about it". But Sumantra replied respectfully "I may not go from hence until the king orders it". Then Dasaratha spoke to him and said "Sumantra! I would see Rama of bright presence as soon as I can. Fetch him hither." The aged minister rejoiced within himself at being the fortunate messenger of some supreme good to Rama. His guileless soul read the words of Kaikeyi as the commands of his lord and he hurried on towards the mansion of the prince. He emerged from the palace of Dasaratha as from the depths of the ocean and found himself in the midst of numerous groups of kings of various countries and the leading nobles of the city, bearing rare and costly presents to their monarch.

CHAPTER XV

RAMA SENT FOR

THEN, Brahmans deeply read in the holy scriptures, court-chaplains, ministers, generals, and civic authorities gathered in the audience hall of the king, their hearts aglow with joy at the prospect of the approaching coronation. Vivasvan, the sun-god, looked down in all his splendour at the assembled crowds and the happy preparations afoot towards the coronation of Rama, the flower of his line. Pushya, the star of the day, shone bright as it abode with Cancer, the natal sign of Rama. The holy waters were gathered in vessels of burnished gold for the consecration bath. Sacred confluences like the Prayaga; the Godavari,

the Cauvery and the other rivers that mingled with the eastern seas ; the Gandaki, the Sona, the Bhadra and the other streams that flow from south to month ; Brahmavarta and Rudravarta in the Naimisa forest and other springs held in high veneration ; lakes, wells, pools and rivulets of hoary sanctity; the oceans and the seas; all contributed their quota. A splendid throne richly wrought ; a chariot spread with tiger-skins ; vessels of gold and silver, curious-shaped, in which floated fried rice, lotus leaves and the milky juice of the Aswattha and the Udumbara tree; honey, curds, clarified butter, fried rice, holy grass, flowers and milk ; well-bred courtesans gaily adorned ; chowries with shafts of gold encrusted with gems, from which rayed out, moonlike, the silky fleece; the umbrella of state spread over head in moon-white lustre ; a lordly bull and horse of spotless white ; an elephant in rut, as bore kings and monarchs ; eight damsels of auspicious features, blazing with gold and gems ; the four kinds of musical instruments, bards, minstrels, panegyrists and heralds ; and other articles used in the coronation-rite of the Ikshvaku princes were kept in readiness by the officers of the king. They assembled at the palace-gates and discussed the unwonted delay of their master. "Whom shall we commission to report our arrival to His Majesty ? He comes not forth ; the sun ascends the steps to his golden throne and brings us nearer to the auspicious moment fixed for Rama's installation."

As thus they spoke, Sumantra addressed himself to the rulers and princes and said " I go hence at the king's command to bring Rama to his presence. The emperor, and Rama, more that he, holds you all in high esteem. Hence, I will even go back to my royal master and make respectful enquiries of him in your name. I will not fail to ascertain why he delays so long in giving audience to his good friends and loving subjects."

And the aged minister, versed in the hoary traditions of the royal houses on earth, retraced his steps towards the women's apartments. He placed himself before the barriers of silk and gold and in well-chosen terms invoked the blessings of the gods on his master's head. "May the Sun and the Moon, Siva, Kubera, Varuna, Agni, Indra and the other Shining Ones ride with you to victory. Night has given place to Day ; everything is ready even as you willed it and we but await your commands Brahmanas, generals and town-prefects eagerly expect your coming. May it please your Majesty to rise."

Dasaratha recognised the voice of his friend and said "Sumantra ! You were commissioned by Kaikeyi to bring Rama here. Why tarry at it ? I sleep not. Away and be back with the prince."

Sumantra bowed in low obeisance ; and happy in the thought of some great good to befall Rama, he left the harem far behind him and took his way through the broad streets, gay with flags and pennons. Groups of people held joyous talk in the roads and squares, all about the grand event towards which the winged Hours were bearing them fast. Anon, Rama's palace rose in view. Large gates of curious workmanship adorned it. Tiny kiosks dotted the extensive grounds, where statues of gold gleamed through garlands of gems and pearls. It burst upon the eye in dazzling splendour and beauty even as the bank of autumnal clouds or a vast cavern in the Mount Meru or a lofty peak of the Dardara ; gems and pearls, scents, and perfumes and all things rare and lovely, were laid under contribution to make it what it was. The cries of swans, peacocks, herons and parrots were borne to the ears along the melodious breeze. Rare paintings covered the walls, while quaint animals pranced or sprung from many an angle and column. Its brightness dazed the senses and the eye. More

like the abode of the Lords of Day and Night it seemed or like the mansion of the Lord of Riches, or like the palace of the Lord of the Immortals or like a cloud-capped summit of the Meru. Strange birds and stranger beasts chirped and moved behind bars of steel and gold. Visitors from foreign lands thronged the grounds in joyful expectation, bearing costly gifts and rare to their beloved prince. Hunchbacks and dwarfs of the Kirata class, moved about short and slim, like black oases in a bank of fleecy clouds. Sumantra steered his way through the happy throngs to the interior. There he came upon a large band of men who had devoted their lives to the service of Rama and watched over him in sleepless vigilance ; they too were eagerly discussing the one topic of the day. Many a hall did the charioteer cross, many a square, and many a court before he drew near the women's apartments. Groups of men waited there before the gates with costly presents and welcome tribute ; there was Satrunjaya, the favorite elephant of Rama, in full rut, like a mountain crowned with clouds, heaving high his huge head and shoulders, all unmindful of the sharp good that bit into its flesh. Rama's favorite ministers in brave attire were there on elephants, horses and chariots. They made respectful way for him and he passed on unimpeded, like a mighty whale through the jewelled deep, to the inner apartments——a miniature city graced with stately buildings, that resembled the huge clouds that rest on mountain peaks or the swift coursing cars of the gods.

CHAPTER XVI

RAMA GOES TO HIS FATHER

SUMANTRA, the living chronicle of the dead past, left behind him the gates of the seraglio crowded with expectant people and entered another suite of apartments comparatively quiet. There he found many armed youths richly attired, watching over the safety of Rama with whole-souled devotion. There were wardens of the women's apartments, venerable old men past the age of ninty-five. The whole world reposed in security under the shadow of Rama's bow ; and Rama slept secure under the shadow of the light wands held in the trembling hands of these ancients. They were clothed in gems and gold, and all to please Rama. They loved him more than his own father Dasaratha ; every time the prince returned from the royal palace after his dinner or supper there, they fondly placed him on their laps, embraced him warmly, smelt his head and would not part with him till they were assured of his happiness of mind and body. The scents, the perfumes that adorned the lovely form of Rama left evident marks upon the bodies of these elders. Verily, it was a more pleasing sight and rare than that of Rama and Sita in their gay attire. They knew that Sumantra was a favorite with Rama and rose in respectful haste to welcome him. The charioteer went round them in reverence and spoke to them humbly, "May I request you to inform Rama that Sumantra, his servant, waits upon his pleasure." Rama was engaged in sweet converse with Sita when the news was brought to him. He knew the aged counsellor as the most intimate friend of his father ; and to win his sire's favour the more, ordered him to be brought to his presence at once.

Sumantra advanced to where Rama sat and beheld the Lord of the universe. Rama was the master of boundless wealth even as Kubera. The Guardian of the North bestowed gold, gems, horses, kine and everything that his followers might pray for ; Sree Rama conferred upon those who had won the right to be near him, the envied privilege of beholding the supreme beauty of his form. He was absorbed in profound meditation upon Narayana, and Seeta with him. His palms were joined in humble reverence, while graceful garlands adorned his broad shoulders. Sumantra, the lowest of the low, beheld Sree Rama, Higher than the Highest. Ah ! What merit did he lay up in past lives ! The golden seat was chased with gems and blazed with lovely statues and rare articles of *vertu.* Priceless rugs covered it and shawls, flower-soft even as the delicate limbs of that prince of men, who reclined thereon as some dark-blue cloud on a golden mountain. The charioteer was blessed to behold the Lord even as He is described under the mystic symbology of Paryanka Vidya in the Kaushitaki Upanishad—a sight deserved more of the Liberated Ones and the Angels before the Throne. Does the Lord say "Thus far I am gracious to my children and no father" ? Sandal paste, red as hog's blood and prepared with saffron paint, adorned his shapely hands and breast. Seeta had touched it and communicated to it, all unconsciously, a brighter lustre, a more delicious coolness, a sweeter fragrance. It is again the Lord's will that wards off from us the obstacles that lie in the way of our beholding his supernal beauty. Seeta stood by, fanning him softly with the moon-white chamara, even as the Moon by the side of the star Chitra on the full moon day in the month of the name. Sumantra beheld him and was rewarded with clearer vision. The Supreme Person shone refulgent even as a sun of limitless radiance ; the Lord of the Worlds

conferred on his devotees the envied previlige of enjoying the bliss of His presence. Sumantra prostrated himself before the Deity of his heart and was rewarded with a brighter and purer body. He folded his palms on his head and made respectful enquiries of his welfare at all times and in all places and said "Fair fruit of Kausalya's glorious past! Your sire desires your presence and so does Kaikeyi; you are expected there very soon."

Rama expressed the very great pleasure the news gave him by bestowing handsome presents on the messenger and said to his wife "Seeta! I think that my father and mother have thought of some new development or modification in connection with my installation. The king considers that it would not be prudent or wise to wait for Bharata's return, and pleads his weight of years and infirmities; Kaikeyi's sharp intellect could not have failed to grasp the motive and, desirous of doing what would give me pleasure, she urges the king to hurry on the arrangements for my investiture. She would do much to advance the peoples' welfare and happiness. My interests and advancement are ever nearest her heart; and she has no other will but her lord's. Hence I am sure that my consecration will be put forward considerably. And it is better still that my dear father and mother chose Sumantra as their messenger to me, as if they wanted to select one who would sacrifice his here and hereafter, if he could further my interests, ever so little. The attendants in the women's apartments are not more solicitous about my good fortune than this emissary from my royal father. He will crown me heir-apparent of this glorious realm and that ere the day grows older. So I go hence to hear my sire's commands. Rest here in comfort and amuse yourself with your friends and people." He cast round her shoulders a rare necklace of priceless pearls,

touched her feet in sweet entreaty and persuaded her to reconcile herself to his absence.

She stood upon a higher level than Rama ; unlike him, she never spent long and dreary months of darkness and torture in that toothless womb of a mother ; she rose to view at the end of a ploughshare, when Janaka of the open Eye prepared the ground for a holy sacrificial rite. Hence it was not amiss that Raghava should lose his heart to her and respect her so. The pearl necklace round Rama's shoulders soon made way for another, rarer and more priceless—the love-laden looks from the dark and unfathomable depths of her eyes. Her home was ever in the heart of Rama and she naturally followed him as far as etiquette allowed, calling down upon his beloved head every blessing she could think of. "I pray that no evil eye rest upon all this boundless beauty and loveliness. May the bright Gods keep away from my lord every harm and evil. May His Majesty place you upon the throne of your glorious ancestors of happy memory and crown you later on, in all pomp and ceremony, during the holy Rajasooya, even as the Demiurge placed the crown of the three worlds on the brows of Indra. I long to see you in sacrificial attire, your initiatory vow taken, pure, intent upon the observance of vows, holy butter on your limbs, a deerskin around your shoulders and a deerhorn in your hands. If Vasishtha ever ordained for you any vow or observance, you used to say to yourself " My Guru has lightened this over much, assuming I have been reared delicately and unused to hardships" and mortify yourself fourfold. Should your teacher tell you 'You should not allow a woman to touch you when you are observing a vow. Of course, this does not apply to your wedded wife, Seeta, you followed him not, but bathed even if you had a suspicion of my skirt brushing yours so lightly. Not that I do not welcome your present accession to power. May Indra watch over

you in the East, Yama in the South, Varuna in the West, and Kubera in the North."

Rama took leave of Seeta, completed the happy preliminaries to his coronation and came out of his seraglio with Sumantra, even as a noble lion from his rocky lair. Lakshmana awaited them at the gates. Anon, in the central hall he came upon his friends and those that waited to see him and gave them kind looks and fair greetings. Then, on to the lofty chariot of silver, bright as blazing fire ; very commodious it was, and richly wrought with gem and gold, that blinded the eye like the noonday sun. Rare tiger-skins covered the seats ; horses of the purest breed were yoked to it, more like elephant calves ; and the noise of the rolling wheels was like the rumbing of clouds. Raghava sprang upon it and drove fast to his father's mansion, even as Indra in his celestial car drawn by the green horses. As the rolling of distant thunder among the hills or as the Lord of Night springing from the Rising mountain, Rama proceeded on his way, while his other self, Lakshmana, guarded his back, the umbrella of state held aloft in one hand and the moon-white Chamara in the other. The assembled thousands raised a shout of joy at the sight of him that rent the very skies. Crowds followed him upon fleet horses, camels, elephants and chariots. Bands of chosen veterans, flashing bright with steel and gold, marched before him, his welfare and safety their only care. The sweet strains of martial music, the plaudits of bards and heralds, and the war-cries of veteran chiefs all rose upon the air in pleasant confusion, as he marched along the royal road. Countless ladies in faultless attire scattered fragrant flowers upon their beloved prince and extolled him high in the joy of their hearts. "Enhancer of Kausalya's delight ! Proceed to take upon yourself the government of this fortunate Kosala, handed down by your ancestors of illustrious memory.

Your mother's heart will surely swell to see you seated on the throne of the Ikshvakus and hold sway over the fortunate millions. Again, there is none that fortune holds so dear as our Seeta. Marvellous, indeed, must have been the merit she has laid up in her past lives to raise her to the envied rank of your favorite wife and faithful, even as the star Rohini, ever inseparable from the Moon." So spoke many a dame and matron, and Rama loved them all the more for their sweet sympathy and whole-souled devotion.

" Rama that goes yonder is the gem of his glorious line and richly deserves the love and esteem of Dasartha, who means to invest him with unbounded swayi ; and that means the realisation of our dearest hopes. It is the greatest good that can ever befall us, for, when Rama becomes the guardian of our interests, none of us will ever know what it is to want or grieve." So ran the words from the assembled crowds in glad acclaim. Rama heard them all and resolved to deserve better their love and confidence. Through huge squares and spacious he drove, dense with bull, elephants and cows, horses and cars, along long lines of palatial stores filled with the rarest products of nature and art, past bands of bards, mintrels, heralds, penegyrists and pursuivants. Sweet strains of festive music mingled with the joyful neighs of horses and trumpetings of elephants and the solemn benedictive chants of Brahmanas. And so he drove along the royal road, even as the Guardian of Riches, on to where his father's palace stood.

CHAPTER XVII

RAMA GOES TO HIS FATHER—(*Continued*)

AY flags and proud pennons rose to the sky from every part of the city. Sandal, aloes, frankincense

and many other rare perfumes spread sweet fragrance every where. The mansions of the nobility gleamed white like a bank of fleecy clouds. The royal road was lined with shops, booths, stalls, stores, emporiums full of rare and priceless silks, cloths, wraps and unbored pearls, crystals and every delicacy and scarce had room for the huge crowds that poured in every moment. And Rama drove along, letting his eyes rest on the familiar and loved scenes that recalled the bright roadway of the Gods on high. The crossings were gay with curds, grains of colored rice, parched grain, sandal, aloes, incense, garlands and offerings of food. His numerous friends and well-wishers gave him their blessings as he passed on. "May your fair brows wear the crown of Kosala. Walk in the traditions of your fathers and extend the shadow of your protecting arm over us, even as Dasaratha and his predecessors used to do. Your accession to the throne spells a long period of peace and prosperity for us. We desire nothing more than to see you ride back to your palace fresh from the consecration bath. What care we for the material pleasures this earth can give us or vows, chants, sacrifices and gifts that can secure to us a happy hereafter? Once again we proclaim that our hearts hold no other wish than to see you monarch of this fair realm."

Such praises and plaudits elated not the heart of Rama: they left his humbler and more solicitous to deserve such unbounded love and confidence. He passed along, rewarding them with a glance, a look, a nod, a word, a bow, a slight raising of the brows or a reverent clasp of the hands as became their rank and station. Those who looked at him but once, stood rooted to the spot, gazing intently at where he flashed upon their sight. Their looks followed their hearts which they had lost to Rama. They saw him in every object; they heard him in every sound. Just conceive what it would have been like *in his presence*!

It is not given to all to be so blessed as to speak to Rama, to pour our hearts to him in eloquent praise, to offer him our poor welcome and homage. The very sight of his supernal beauty raises us to the loftiest heights of ineffable bliss. But it is not beyond the bounds of possibility for one to have a sight of his glorious presence ; or more fortunate still, to come within the range of his compassionate glance. But, should there be a man who neither saw Rama nor was seen by him, the meanest object in creation will rise up against him in scorn and contempt. Now,, the whole world may shun a man ; yet, he can never fail to have the approbation of his conscience to console him ; while this miserable wretch is utterly denied even that poor comfort. The small still voice in him will spurn him away. Rama is the same to all, high or low, peasant or philosopher, man or beast ; he fulfils in them their utmost deserts and withholds from them nothing—not even the bliss of Emancipation. Hence, it is no wonder that they love him so and lose their hearts to him.

Crossings, fanes, holy trees, halls, he passed along, going round them in reverence, and approached the palace of his sire that, with its Vardhamana houses flashing with gems, gave one the idea of the mansion of Indra come down on earth. Lofty towers hid the sky from view, like cloud-banks or Kailasa peaks or the snow-white Vimanas (aerial-cars) of gods. He drove through three blocks guarded by archers, and walked through a couple more until he was at the gates of the seraglio. He left his friends and retinue there and entered that paradise on earth. The vast crowd waited outside in joyous anticipation, even as the shoreless ocean awaits the rising of the moon and said to themselves "Some marvellous good fortune welcomes our Rama yonder; he will be back among us in no time and give us the pleasure of beholding his coronation."

CHAPTER XVIII

KAIKEYI'S TRIUMPH

RAMA entered and saw his father lying on the bed, with hopeless eye and pallid mien and Kaikeyi standing by. He clasped his father's feet with humble reverence and next touched those of Kaikeyi. Dasaratha managed to force a cry "Rama" and then speech failed him ; cruel tears blinded his eyes and he saw not Rama. The prince had never seen his father in such a fearful state. Sudden terror gripped him fast, even as though he had set his foot on a cobra's hood, all heedlessly. No danger or misfortune, calamity or peril had any power to ruffle the serenity of his heart. But his fear was great that he might somehow or other be the unconscious cause of the present misery of Dasaratha. His father was sighing hot and furiously, like a wounded snake ; pale and emaciated with grief, bewildered and dazed, he lay there in strange despair, like the unfathomable monarch of the waters disturbed to the very depths ; or like the Lord of Day in the jaws of the dread Rahu ; or like a Rishi shorn of his spiritual lustre by polluting himself with a lie. Rama's heart boiled within his breast like an enraged sea to think that his might have been the hand that had, all innocently, dealt the blow. The king's interests ever lay nearest his soul and he said to himself " Wondrous strange ! My lord's countenance is not bright, as usual, with joy at beholding me ! It matters not that something might have roused his displeasure against me during my absence ; the moment I went into his presence, he would clean forget it and turn upon me a face wreathed in smiles. And my dear sire's heart is torn with grief the moment he sets his eyes on me !" With a heavy heart and wan face he addressed himself to Kaikeyi and said " Mother mine ! Is my sire displeased with me for any unwitting fault of mine ? I pray you enlighten

me. If it were so, whom have I to intercede for me but your good self ? Unvarying in his love and affection for me, nay, almost verging upon partiality, how is it I find him careworn, miserable and ominously silent to me ? This tabernacle of ours is meant to go through every kind of experience, good and evil, happy and wretched ; and no one's life is a bright summer all along. So, it is quite in the order of things that he should be subject to infirmities and maladies. Or has he some great grief weighing heavy on his heart ? Or is it anything untoward that has befallen Bharata, who brings joy to the hearts of the beholders, or Satrughna the unshaken or my dear mothers? He is my lord and king ; my duty ever waits upon his pleasure. He is my fond father ; the highest merit I could ever hope to lay by is to obey his lightest behests. I take no pleasure in life unless it were devoted to his service ; but now, when his heart is turned away from me, in anger, all the more it is an imperious command. A little thought would convince us that we derive from our father the bodies we use. So, he is the only god we see and feel. Beyond a doubt, our highest aspirations are fulfilled and our greatest good secured by carrying out his commands. Or, is it that you have, through anger or love, spoken to him harshly and clouded his spirits ? Mother ! I pray to know the truth of it. What is it that has brought about this sudden and strange revolution in the nature and thoughts of our lord ?"

Kaikeyi knew as well as any that she had no fault to find with Rama ; but, her solicitude for the interests of herself and Bharata blinded her to every other consideration ; and she felt no fear nor shame that she was about to speak to Rama, words unholy, unrighteous, that were to be the prolific mother of countless woes and calamities. "Rama ! The king is not offended with you ; nor is he afflicted with any other grief. He desires to speak to you

somewhat; but hesitates out of a natural fear that you may not carry out his wishes. You know how much he loves you; and his very love stands in the way of his speaking to you anything that might pain your heart. He has made a promise to me long ago, and it rests with *you* to fulfil it. He forced his boons upon me and repents of it when I hold him to his promise, like any low-born churl. Is it not supremely foolish in him, to grant me two boons of my choice and grieve when I demand its fulfilment, like one that shuts the stable when the horse is stolen? Dharma is the root of this universe, so say the wise. And it is *your* plain duty to see that he does not prove a traitor to Truth through his unseasonable anger towards me. If you give your word to me that you will anyhow fulfil his promise to me, just or unjust, I will even speak on his behalf, as his extreme love to you ever stands in the way of his telling it to you himself."

Unutterable grief filled the heart of Rama on hearing this. "Alas! What a fate! Has it come to this that my own mother should suspect me of unwillingness or hesitation to obey the behests of Dasaratha, my father, my king and my teacher?" He turned to Kaikeyi and exclaimed in the hearing of his sire "Fie, fie! Would that I were stricken dead and sucked into the dark depths of oblivion than hear from your lips the cruel words 'if' and *that* in connection with my father! Is he not my lord and ruler, my father, my master, the guardian of my interests? A word from him and I leap into the flames or quaff the poison-cup or plunge into the depths of the ocean. So I pray you speak to me what my lord has at heart. I swear most solemnly to fulfil it whatever it might be. Need I tell you that it is utterly unnecessary and ridiculous for me to promise or to swear. *Rama speaks not twice.*"

Then, Kaikeyi, the most hardened of sinners, addressed

herself to Rama, the soul of truth and candor and said "In the long past there was a great battle between the gods and the asuras in which your father fought for the gods. The asuras wounded him grievously so that he was at death's door. I brought him back to life and safety and he was pleased to give me two boons. I demand them of him now. If you have any care that the promises made by yourself and by your father should hold good, pay heed to my words. Bharata, my son, should be crowned as the heir-apparent to-day and with the very articles prepared towards your coronation. You should cancel all the arrangements made for your installation and live for fourteen years in the forest of Dandaka like a recluse, with matted hair, deer-skin and bark of trees. My Bharata should reign from this Ayodhya over the broad earth with all its treasures of gold and silver, horses and elephants. The king is torn between the conflicting emotions of love, compassion and grief; wan, emaciated and bewildered, he will not even allow you to see him. Bright scion of the Raghus, who never went back upon their plighted faith! Fulfil the promise made by your sire. Walk in the path of Truth and save him from the jaws of hell."

The cruel words fell on the wounded heart of Dasaratha and he writhed in impotent agony. "Alas! What have I done to be doomed to this torture, to listen, all powerless to such dreadful words from this fiend in human shape? Why was I chosen the instrument of inflicting this cruel injury upon Rama, dearer to me than life itself, a shameful act which even his worst enemies would shrink from polluting their hands with?" But Rama's heart was, if possible, more serene and joyful in that there was offered him a chance of placing before the world an example of filial duty. His face was a faithful index of his heart, and showed not the least sign of grief, anger or disappointment. Never for a

moment did the thought cross his mind "What grievous injustice? What a dreadful irony of fate! This crown is mine by right of birth. My father promised it to me before the world. And now, at the last moment, I am to lose it, to give my consent, without a pang, to see the son of my step-mother seated on the throne, to renounce with a smiling face the comforts, the luxuries, the wealth, pomp and power of what I was taught to expect as legitimately mine and doom myself to a living death in the dreadful forests for fourteen livelong years." Verily, no one would speak in the same breath of misery or unhappiness and the supreme Lord, one of the gems in whose radiant crown is infinite Bliss.

CHAPTER XIX

"I PROMISE"

RAMA lent a joyful ear to the words of Kaikeyi that ruined his brightest hopes and blotted out for ever the happy future that was opening out to him. He clasped his hands in profound reverence to his mother and said "My queen! On my eyes and ears be it. I take myself to the dark forests and live the life of a hermit, with matted hair, deer skin and bark of trees. Is it not my bounden duty to fulfil my father's promise? But, the king knows me better than myself; no misfortune or calamity has the least power to shake his iron will; the flower of valor and heroism, I wonder that he evinces not his usual joy and delight at beholding me. I am all anxious to know why. But, I pray you entertain not the least suspicion about my willingness to keep my word. I swear it before you once again most solemnly. *I go to the dark forests to lead the life of a hermit, with matted hair, clad in deer-skin and bark of trees.* His Majesty is the most watchful guardian of my

interests. I have sat at his feet and learned the truth of life and being. He is the lord and ruler over us. Ingratitude was never associated with his name, much less towards you. Is it not my most joyful duty to obey his behests without question, without hesitation, at any cost? But, one thought rankles in my heart. Why did I not receive the order for Bharata's coronation from the lips of his Majesty? Was he anxious to spare me any probable pain of disappointment? If so, he forgets that Bharata is my brother. Knows he of any one who loves Bharata more? When I broke the bow of Siva in the hall of Janaka and won Seetha as the price of valor, would I not have most joyfully resigned my claims to her in his favour, if Bharata had but expressed a wish? This mighty kingdom, this wealth, nay, my life itself, I hold but valuable only so far as they are of service to him. Then, my father and lord has himself laid his commands on me that I should see the crown placed on the brows of Bharata. It is a most sacred duty with me to fulfil his promises to you; your inclination too runs that way. Are not these reasons enongh? Alas! My heart bleeds to see His Majesty hang his stately head in sorrow and grief, dropping scalding tears on the affrighted earth. I pray you to anyhow soothe away his grief. Let countless messengers ride fast on fleet coursers to the capital of the lord of the Kekayas to bring back Bharata as his majesty has ordered. I go straight from here to the forests of Dandaka and live there for ten years and four. Would I think twice about obeying my father's commands?"

Kaikeyi knew full well that Rama never went back upon his word; he was as good as gone to Dandaka. Her heart rejoiced greatly and she did her best to hurry him on. "You are ever right. Let messengers hasten on fleet coursers even now to bring back Bharata from his uncle's

capital. It does not befit you to delay here, and you so eager to go to the forests. So, you do well to hasten your departure to Dandaka. It is but the sense of shame that prevents His Majesty from ordering you himself. Let it not lie heavy upon your heart. I know full well that he bathes not nor breaks his fast unless he sees you depart for the woods".

Dasaratha was shocked beyond conception at these cruel words and crying "Alas! what horrible iniquity? What have I done that my ears should be polluted with such foul accusations"?, he fell in a dead faint on his bed of gold. Rama sprang to his side and caught him in his arms, while the cruel words of Kaikeyi lashed him, like a spirited steed, to hasten his departure to the forests. But, the slightest shadow of grief never dimmed the bright serenity of his soul. "My queen! You do me but ill justice to think that my heart hankers after wealth, pomp and power. Far be it from my thoughts to remain here, to win the love and affection of the people and rule over them. Methinks you to read my stay here to mean—If I manage to stay here till Bharata comes, who knows that he may renounce the crown in my favor out of his love and devotion to me?' My acts, my words, my thoughts centre round one desire and only one—to fulfil my dharma. I pray you to lay to your heart well that the hollow joys of life have no power over me and that I am as dispassionate as the sages that abide in the holy forests. I pray you remember carefully that I hold my life of value only so far as it serves to fulfil His Majesty's pleasure. Know I of any higher dharma than to wait on the pleasure of my father and serve him in thought, word and deed? It needs not the commands of his majesty; a word from your good self, a hint is more than enough to make the forests a joyful home for me during twice seven years. No one has a

more unquestioned right than yourself to dispose of me in every way ; I pride myself on being the chosen and privileged servant of Your Majesty ; yet I find that you have thought it fit to ask this trifle of my father ; I am tempted to think that you allow not the possibility of my possessing such noble qualities as magnanimity and truth. Bear with me a while till I take leave of my mother and console Seeta. I pray you look to the necessary arrangements about Bharata's succession to the crown and the due discharge of his filial duties to our lord. For, it is the dharma sanctified by the immemorial usage of my ancestors of happy memory "

These gentle words, so noble, so generous and so utterly unselfish were too much for poor old Dasaratha; a tempest of grief shook his whole being to its very foundations. And, he sobbed aloud, while burning tears coursed down his aged cheeks. Then Rama touched, all reverently, the feet of his sire utterly senseless with grief and of the diabolical Kaikeyi, went round them in low humility and walked out of the women's apartments No shadow of grief or anger or disappointment or annoyance dimmed the brightness of his looks, he took his way to his palace while his friends followed him in awed silence At his heels went Lakshmana in terrible wrath, hissing like a wounded cobra and powerless to keep back his fast flowing tears. One should go round in reverence, rare articles, auspicious objects, fanes of gods, and crossings, even as the Books lay it down ; hence, Rama went round the materials ready stored against his coronation. He would not so much as glance at them ; but passed on slowly, praying hard all the while that they might be better utilized in the coming coronation of Bharata. The dark night has no power to dim the beauty of the moon, ever the bright bringer of joy to all ; even so, the loss of a crown and the unrighteous banishment from his kingdom had no power

to dim the glory of the Lord of the worlds, of whom eternal and boundless Bliss is one of his attributes. His heart put awav from itself a proffered throne and sway over the broad earth and elected to live a life of dreary exile in the trackless forests; verily, the souls of the great sages and saints were not more serene, dispassionate and unshaken. He gently refused the umbrella of state, the chamaras and the other insignia of royalty and proceeded on foot to the mansion of his mother to inform her of the sad news. He dismissed, with a smile, his friends and loving citizens and kept his senses under stern restraint; he grieved to see others grieve for him, but would not allow the least sign of it to escape him. Those around him were unable to detect any change in his face or looks or words or demeanour; he was, as ever, the lord of Sree and the flawless champion of truth. He lost nothing of his innate cheerfulness of heart, even as the autumn moon whose brightness wanes not. Undisturbed by joy or sorrow, unparalleled in fame, Rama was still the giver of boundless pleasure and happiness to all beings and spoke sweet words and kind to a'l around him And so, he passed on to his mother's palace.

Lakshmana, his heroic brother and his peer in noble excellences, followed him there, exercising an iron control over his rebellious grief. Rama beheld there groups of men and women rejoicing in the anticipated happiness of his coronation and said to himself with a sigh "Alas! that I should be the messenger of grief and many other calamities to these my friends who are now so happy! I should exercise the utmost vigilance and control lest I betray the least sign of grief in my features or behaviour, and these good souls die of a broken heart" And so saying, he entered the apartments of the queen with a cheerful smile.

CHAPTER XX

"YOU SHALL NOT GO"

RAMA left the apartments of Kaikeyi with bowed head and clasped hands while doleful cries and heart-rending lamentations followed him from the assembled women therein. "Alas! Rama needed not the word of his father to attend, to the veriest detail, to the comfort and happiness of every one of us here. Rama is to be driven to the gloomy forests to-day and he, the Goal of the aspirations of all beings and the surest Means thereto He waits upon our pleasure with greater diligence, devotion and respect than he ever accords to Kausalya, the mother that gave him birth. Harsh speech provokes him not to reply; nor do his acts or words provoke anger in others; nay, his sweet and gentle accents soothe and calm the hearts of such as give way to senseless wrath. Our king has clean taken leave of his senses. Has he not set his hand to the glorious work of universal ruin and destruction by banishing to the woods Rama, in whom all things live and move and have their being?" And they lifted their voices aloud, gentle and simple, queen and maiden and cried 'Fie' and 'Shame' upon the monarch. The frightful clamour from the apartments of the women fell upon the ears of Dasaratha; his feeble heart, stricken till then with the grief of his son banished to a grievous doom, broke down quite, and he fainted away where he sat, from grief and shame. The pitiful wail fell upon the ears of Rama as he passed out; it grieved his heart sore, but as he saw no means of assuaging their griefs, he put on a cheerful front, that he might not, at least, intensify them. Heaving hot and profound sighs, like a wounded elephant, he never lost his presence of mind, but quickened his steps to his mother's palace followed by Lakshmana.

The chief of the wardens there was a very old gentleman; he sat there in his place of office, wand in hand, while countless subordinates stood round in deep reverence. They sprang up in joy to welcome Rama and shouted ' Victory! Ever victory to thee'. He passed on into the second block filled with brahmanas profoundly versed in the sacred scriptures, whom Dasaratha delighted to honor. Rama saluted those aged repositories of saintliness and wisdom and passed on to the third block guarded by elderly dames and damsels. They gave him their sincere and joyful blessings and announced his approach to Kausalya.

The queen spent the long night in fast and meditation to secure peace and prosperity to her darling son. At daybreak she engaged herself in reverent worship of the lord Vishnu. Ever occupied with vows, fasts, penances, mortifications and meditation, she was in the sacrificial hall, where Rama found her clad in garments of white silk, directing the brahmanas in making offerings of auspicious things into the fire with appropriate chanting of the mantras. Curds, colored unbroken rice, ghee, sweets, cooked food, parched grain, white garlands, sweet drinks, food prepared with sesamum seed, sacred twigs for fuel, a water jar and the other necessary materials stood in readiness for divine service. She was offering libations of water to the gods to ensure welfare and happiness to her son, and was wholly absorbed in the details thereof. Her frame was wasted through constant observance of vows and fasts, but bright was the halo of glory that surrounded her, even as a goddess. She was overjoyed to see her son in her rooms, a rare visitor there and sprang to meet him, even as a mare her fond foal. Rama went round his mother in reverence, bowed low and touched her feet. Kausalya embraced him fondly, smelt the crown of his head and her supreme love and affection for him found expression in hearty and sincere prayers for his

good. "May length of days, boundless fame and the proper observance of the royal traditions crown you ever, even as your ancestors of glorious memory, righteous, noble and grey in the experience of years. Your father was never known to break his word. This day he will instal you as the heir-apparent, even as he promised it to you. For, is he not deeply versed in the knowledge and practice of the mysteries of dharma? She offered him a seat and invited him to dine there.

Modest and unassuming by nature, Rama's extreme devotion to his mother would not allow him to take his seat before her. He touched it instead and replied to her with folded hands and with the least tinge of shame-facedness in his voice. "Mother! A great fear has befallen us that will cause no small grief and anxiety to you, to Seeta and to Lakshmana. The king has given orders to stop my coronation and instal Bharata in my place. I am ordered to live for fourteen years in the forests of Dandaka I go straight from here and *that now*. I have come to take leave of you. I have resolved to dwell in the uninhabited wilds, feeding upon honey, roots and fruits, even as the hermits and abstaining from the flesh of animals. What have I to do with these seats curiously wrought with priceless diamonds? The Vishtara is more meet for one of my order."

The cruel words fell like a thunder-bolt on Kausalya and she fainted away from excess of grief, even as a huge Sala tree in the forest cut down by the axes of woodmen, or even as a Shining One hurled down to the earth from the Mansions of Light. Rama sprang towards her and raising her all gently in his arms, chafed her wasted limbs, as she lay like an uprooted plantain tree or like a mare who rolls in the dust to shake off the fatigue that comes of being over burned. Soon she regained consciousness; a stranger to such calamities, fitted in every way to enjoy the utmost joy

and happiness that life can give, and brought up in the very lap of wealth, luxury and power, she bitterly complained of her fate. "Darling ! I am sure that all this grief would not have befallen me were you not born to me as my son. A barren women has no other sorrow than that of childlessness. I sink under the heavy load of manifold misfortunes. I have a son, but I have him not. I spent over him years of care and solicitude, but I live to see the work of my hands undone before my eyes. I counted upon your devoted service to me in my last days ; I fondly hoped that your hands will close mine eyes before they take leave of the light of the sun ; but I live to see you violently torn away from me in my helpless old age. The curse of childlessness has practically come back upon me to dog my dying days. Alas ! A barren wife has only the disease of her heart to grapple with ; but heart, mind, senses, body, all are hopelessly consumed by my grief.

"To the world I am the queen consort of Dasaratha of Ayodhya, the lord of the earth ; but, devoid of the wealth, the power and the pomp that make it a reality. My husband's heart is turned away from me. Your birth gave me a new lease of life and instilled fresh hope in my heart that I might get back a husband's love and queenly power through his supreme affection to you. That has been the main spring of my life. Alas ! Grief more intense, greater than I have experiened till now, is my portion till death. Denied of the joy and comfort that is mine by right, I have to endure the cruel words and wanton indignities from the other wives of my husband Favorites of fickle fortune, a king's fancy or whim has raised them to where they stand now, co-wives with me and rivals for my husband's love. They have poisoned my lord's heart and shut me out from the light of his affection. Well. Did they keep it back till now? They but hinted, suggested ; but hereafter

they would thrust their insolence upon my face and cry in scorn and fury 'Get away. Darken not the presence of *my* lord'. Or they may adopt a tone of ridicule and say 'Surely, a barren woman is, by nature, fitted to be the centre of feasts and pageants?' Or, when the monarch chances to be my guest, they will burst on us with envy and drag him away thence by force crying 'What do you do *here*? Know you not that your place is in *my* rooms?' Their birth, their status and their talents do not in the least give them courage to speak such words to me, were it not for the cruel blow dealt by Fortune to my honor and happiness. Women do not survive such shocks. Before me stretches a whole eternity of grief and tears, unparalleled, unutterable. Behold! they whelm me quite and you are by my side—the flower of valor, my first-born and the next in the order of succession to the throne of the Earth. Just imagine what it would be like *when you are away*. Death, natural or violent, would be a merciful boon. Every day finds my husband colder to me. Destined by birth and by fortune to lord it over the earth and its countless millions, here am I placed, by sufferance, in the same level as the waiting women of Kaikeyi. Nay, not so; for, they at least come in for a share of her favour.

"If there chance to be any well-meaning soul who was devoted to me and spoke to me words of hope and cheer, he will avoid me like a pestilence, lest Kaikeyi's son might punish him cruelly for it. Kaikeyi has never a kind look or a word for me; cruel taunts and cutting sarcasms were ever known to fall from her lips where I was concerned; and now this last and cruellest stroke of misfortune delivers me over to her, body and soul. Have I the heart to brave her frowns? It is seventeen years since I saw your sweet face and derived marvellous patience to bear my cross. My Rama will grow to be a youth; he will take his place on the throne

of his father; and then my sorrow sets for ever. But, alas! my hopes are nipped in the bud; the gibes and the jeers of my rivals would pierce my wound heart; and how long can this poor wasted frame bear those refined torments? And it is a night that knows no morn.

"Youth, health and beauty have passed away from me. I can be nothing but an eye-sore to the king. I am sure that it is not in me to live this dog's life of misery and disgrace without the light of your sweet presence to relieve the awful gloom.

"Verily, this is a dark mystery, that the countless fasts, vows, observances, and prayers, all directed to one end, your happiness and prosperity, have borne no fruit. My sweet hopes have turned to dust and ashes in my mouth; the glorious future that dawned on my expectant sight has suddenly darkened into a gloom ominous and terrible. Well, I must even reap what I sowed. I made the bed and must perforce lie upon it. My heart breaks not under the stress and strain of this mighty calamity that comes upon me all on a sudden, even as a roaring flood that rushes down during the rains along the bed of some broad river, while the solid banks crumble into powder. Is it imperishable? Is this attenuated frame of mine really made of the heart of the adamant that it is grief-proof? It is then true that death comes not upon a man a second sooner or later than its time. Or has death forgotten me? Or is the world of Yama full to overflowing and there is no room for me? Would that the dread lord of Death bear me away hence this very moment, even as the king of the beasts carries away a weeping fawn or doe. If there is the least chance of our being blessed with death and oblivion before our time, I would go straight from here to the mansions of Yama, than live on miserably down here, even as a cow violently deprived of her one calf.

"Alas ! A cry in the wilderness, a seed sown on rocks has been all my worship, meditation, charity and penance to secure lasting happiness and power to my darling boy. This is the most unkindest cut of all.

" My place is not here when you are in the woods and I will even follow you where you go. A weak and aged cow can never be parted from the side of the calf on which its hopes and joys rest." Thus moaned and wailed Kausalya in the utter agony of her grief. Then it came back to her that she might have to part from Rama at any time; her rivals will wreak upon her the hoarded vengeance of the long past ; Rama was bound by the bonds of truth and was absolutely powerless to stretch forth a helping hand ; she raised her voice and wept aloud, even as a she-kinnari who sees her young ones struggling in the toils of the fowler

CHAPTER XXI

" YOU SHALL NOT GO "—(*continued*)

THEN Lakshmana turned to Kausalya, who was lamenting her miserable fate, and spoke to her as became the occasion. " Mother ! It seems to me extremely unjust and improper that Rama should renounce the crown that is his by lawful right and go to the forest and all at the bidding of a woman. He may say 'It is not Kaikeyi's order that sends me into exile, but his majesty's. Well, his majesty is tottering under the weight of years and hence is beset with fancies unsuited to his age ; the pleasures of the senses enslave him quite. He may say 'A pure heart can set at naught the senses and all their wiles'; but his reason is completely unhinged by love and passion ; besides, there is that evil-hearted woman

Kaikeyi ever at his elbow, hounding him on to fresh iniquities. Invested with boundless power and wealth, what would not the monarch do to win a smile of that siren?

"If you object that Rama might have deserved the punishment by any fault or crime of his, I joyfully challenge any one in all the worlds to charge Rama with treason or treachery or any heinous sin. I see none, not even his worst enemy, not even the most abandoned wretch that was ever justly punished by him, who would ever raise his voice in complaint against Rama, even behind his back. Then, what chance for any to accuse him to his face? (I have made up my mind to rid this earth of the unworthy ruler of Ayodhya. I care not if he is my father, or my king, or hoary with age). An ideal father, truly! He does well to banish Rama to the dreadful forests. For, it is a plain fact that needs no support of inference that Rama excels the very gods in purity at heart. His thoughts, words and acts are ever set unswervingly on the Path of Right. The happiness of his people is ever the goal of his ambition; good men and great have had the training of him; he has under stern control his senses and their ever-fleeting ruler, the mind; he has endeared himself even to Kaikeyi and his other enemies; he is the embodiment of duty and justice; nay, his lawful right to the throne as the eldest son needs no other ally. And would any right-minded person banish him from the kingdom for no reason whatever, on the eve of his coronation, towards which he had plighted his faith? I care not for his grey hairs, for the sixty-thousand years that have passed over his head. They disgrace him all the more; a slave to lust and passion, abandoned to all sense of shame and decency, this hoary libertine is a blot upon good society; and I am rendering a very great service to the cause of morality and justice, if I send him out of the world which he befouls with his presence.

"Let that be. Stranger still it is to see our prince, deeply versed in the traditions of royalty, render absolute obedience to the word of the king in his second childhood, a very dilapidated Don Juan! Brother! Make yourself master of this kingdom before others come to know of this. With me at your back, I defy any one in all the worlds to approach you. It were easier task to put to flight the dread god of Death in the lawful discharge of his duty. Let the millions here in Ayodhya come against us, old and young, Brahmana and Kshatriya; it is child's play for me to reduce this fair city to a howling wilderness in the twinkling of an eye. It matters not if Bharata stands before us with his friends, his allies, and his well-wishers to support him. My keen shafts shall send them straight to the realms of death. The gentle and the meek are ever insulted and trampled upon; merit is never recognized unless it strongly asserts itself.

"I see no injustice, no sin in taking the life of that wicked man, our unnatural father, who, at the instigation of Kaikeyi, allies himself with our foes and works evil to us. Or I would temper justice with mercy and immure him in the depths of a dungeon where he may drag on his miserable days, and repent if he can. The Books lay it down that our teacher or our father deserves summary chastisement at our hands if he is intoxicated with boundless pride and is lost to the sense of right and wrong.

"How dared he promise this kingdom to Kaikeyi when it is yours by every right, human and divine, when he knows that he has no right to alienate it? Did he count upon his valour and that of his armies to chase you from here? Or, is he resolved to fulfil his word to Kaikeyi at any cost? Let him know that it is utterly and absolutely impossible, now and for ever. What a mighty hero he is to hope to defeat Rama and his devoted servant Lakshmana and place

Bharata on the throne of the Kosalas ! Mother ! Rama is my brother ; he is the object of my reverence and sincere love ; and here I solemnly swear on the truth that I hold dear, on the bow that I wield, on the gifts I have bestowed in charity, on the worship I have offered to the bright gods, that it matters not whether Rama betakes himself to the dark woods or leaps into the heart of the raging fire, but you will find me there before him. Mother ! It shall be my care to place my valour and prowess at your service and put away grief and anxiety from you. This day, my brother and yourself will behold the might of my arm."

Kausalya heard him out with renewed hope and joy and, with a troubled heart and faltering voice, said " Rama, my darling ! Heard you the words that fell from the lips of your brother Lakshmana ? They need no comment and I leave it to your good sense to act as seems best. You may say 'A father's words are a law to his son.' But, is this your father's command ? Nay, it is but the insidious instigation of Kaikeyi, my rival and the evil genius of our king. Besides, it is all opposed to reason, to right and to justice. Is it kind of you, is it dutiful, to abandon me to my enemies, helpless, alone and stricken with grief and misfortune ?

" Law and duty have no mysteries for you. You have set your heart upon fulfilling the dharma of carrying out your father's commands. But know you not that there is a higher dharma than that ? The Books teach us that the mother is the highest and most reverent object that a man can have in this world So, stay with me and devote yourself to my service. I can assure you that there is no higher dharma, none more imperative. Kasyapa of yore, stayed with his mother and rendered her faithful service and loving, with restrained self ; his noble tapas was rewarded with the high regions of light and he took his place among the Patriarchs (Prajapatis). As your father is to you, so am I.

He is worthy of your love and reverence, and so am I. His word is law unto you, and so is mine. Now, I like not your banishing yourself to the forests of Dandaka; you can never have my consent to it. What joy have I in life apart from you? Life itself is a curse to me unless I spend it by your side. I count it a privilege and pleasure to be with you though I feed upon grass. If you ever leave my side when I am assailed by misfortune and calamity, I will starve myself to death. The Ruler of the Waters once had the misfortune to grieve the heart of his mother and expiated that lapse of filial duty by bitter experience of the hells that are reserved for the slayers of brahmanas; and eternal misery shall be *your* lot here on earth."

The heart-rending laments of his mother had no power to seduce Rama away from the Path of Duty and he replied all gently "On me lies the duty of obeying the commands of my sire; my fealty to you weighs with me no less. But it is impossible for me to do it simultaneously. Besides, my father's orders have the advantage of priority and demand my immediate attention; I dare not set them aside. So I go to the forest and pray you, with my head at your feet, give me your leave and your blessings. Do I seem to pierce your wounded heart? Maharshi Kandu, of yore, slew a sacred cow at the commands of his father; and was he unacquainted with the intricacies of Dharma? Was he not an ascetic of stern vows? I take another instance nearer and more pertinent. King Sagara of our line, once laid his orders on his sixty thousand sons to tear up this broad and fair earth. They obeyed his behests to the very letter and recked not that they were consumed to ashes in the execution of their duty. My father demands of me no such sacrifice of my life, though it is his to dispose of as he wills; he but requires me to spend a trifling period of fourteen years in the forests of Dandaka. And shall

I, all cravenly, cry upon it as a great hardship? Jamadagni ordered his son to lop off the head of the mother that bore him; and did Parasurama waver or flinch? Shall I prove a traitorous and unworthy son to my sire, lest I should cause you grief of heart for a while? Have we not instances of many a god-like son who carried out his father's behests at any cost? Is it sinful of *me* to try to walk in their path? Am I the solitary pilgrim on it? Have I not their example, their countenance and their sanction to cheer me on? It is no new hobby of my invention. It is the law of man and it is no rare merit in me if I fulfil it. I will sacrifice any thing to spare you the slightest pang; but since I can not, consistent with the discharge of my duty, I console myself with the hope that no one has come to grief till now, who happened to cause some grief to his mother, in carrying out his father's commands."

Unrivalled in persuasive eloquence as in valor, he next addressed himself to Lakshmana and said "Brother mine! You do me but scant justice to think I know not your boundless love and devotion to me, your prowess, your fortitude, and your all-consuming energy. My mother grieves sorely, all forgetful of the inner mysteries of truth and peace. Surely, it ill becomes you to speak thus and *you* deeply versed in the secrets of Dharma! Truth is deeply implanted in Dharma; hence it is the most coveted of the Purusharthas (Aims of Life). I secure it best by obeying my father's behests in preference to those of my mother. No one can set out to walk on the Way of Right and fail to fulfil his promise to his father or to mother or to the saintly Brahmanas. Kaikeyi but passed me on the order of my father that I should dwell in the forests; and who am I to say nay? So, put away far from you the cruel instincts of a fanatic Kshatriya, that puts you up to say 'Let us slay this old man, our father, and rule over his kingdom.' You are no blind atheist to

take kingly polity as the guide of your life, even when it leads away from the Path of Dharma. Nor are you fool enough to follow Dharma, when it leads you away from the Path of Compassion and Love. You never knew me to lead you astray."

So spoke he out of deep love for his brother ; anon, he bowed to Kausalya over joined palms of respect and said "Mother ! Is it not immemorial Dharma that you, I, Seeta, Lakshmana and Sumitra abide by the commands of my father ? His orders demand my immediate attention ; and I will dwell for twice seven years in the pleasant woods. Next come your behests; and I will thereafter wait upon you, ever rendering true service and joyful. A brief spell of hardship and rough life for me ; and my word to my father kept, I fly here on the wings of speed to touch your feet, even as King Yayati, who was banished but for a while from his bright abode in the god-world to this dark and dull earth of ours. Hence, I pray you master your grief and give me leave to go. Direct the auspicious rites that would secure us a safe journey and happy and bring me back to your side. I entreat it upon my very life. Order the preparations towards my coronation to proceed no further ; put away your grief and sorrow from the eyes of the world ; and let me have your leave to speed to the forest that Dharma might find in me a loyal servant."

Rama's eloquent pleading, so consonant with virtue and duty, so respectfully firm, so utterly devoid of any selfish grief or disappointment, proved too much for Kausalya and she fainted under the shock. Regaining her senses after a while, she looked Rama in the eye and cried "Child ! Do I not deserve at least as much love and obedience at your hands as you owe your father ? Flesh of my flesh you are. I bore you in my womb and watched you grow from infancy to youth. Does it not count any-

thing ? You see my unspeakable misery and yet you will leave me here, alone and helpless, to the tender mercies of my relentless foes. Do you expect me to give my consent to it ? What is life to me in this world if you are not by my side ? What care I to dwell in the radiant worlds of joy or of the Fathers or of the gods ? An hour with you is worth eternities in those spheres."

Elephant-hunters take their stand during dark nights across its paths and seek to drive it back towards the treacherous pits, by threatening it with blazing torches, only to enrage it afresh, without turning it from the track it had marked out for itself. Even so the pitiable laments of his mother but roused him to fresh energy and firmness, in that she would not yet desist from dragging his feet from the Path of Dharma. He saw his beloved mother senseless with grief ; he saw his brother Lakshmana writhe under the torments of impotent anger and valor; yet, his heart never wavered, not for a second, in its loyal allegiance to Dharma ; and his words to Kausalya were in perfect consonance therewith. Duty, equally imperative and just, but conflicting, hemmed him on every side ; and he hesitated not for a moment to choose the best and follow it with unshaken resolve. And the countless worlds cannot furnish another who could take his place by the side of Rama, the beloved of all beings. Such words fall fitly and gracefully from his lips, and from no other. "Lakshmana ! You force me to remind you that I know and appreciate best your whole-souled devotion to me and your matchless valor. But you force me also to say that you and my dear mother cause me fruitless annoyance and trouble by your wilful blindness to my inner motives. Hear me place before you at some length what I hinted to you just now. A wife secures to her husband Dharma, if she acts in consonance with the laws of his life ; she secures to him Love, if she deserves to find a place in his

heart; she secures to him wealth, if she is the mother of an exemplary son; thus one and the same woman helps a man to achieve three Aims of Life. These are said to be the surest means to attain the happiness that accrues of Dharma. Or, in other words, do your Duty to the best of your lights and you are master of the above means. Take my word for it that this is utter truth and beyond the shadow of a doubt. None should waste his time and energy over anything that leads him not straight to the Three Purusharthas. Engage yourself in the conscientious performance of that which will secure you Dharma as its result. The world hates him who seeks wealth at any cost; nor is it seemly devote ourselves solely to the pursuit of pleasure; so, let us decide where my line of duty lies at present. The king is my Guru, in that I sat at his feet to learn the mysteries of the art of War and the science of Polity; he is my monarch under the shadow of whose protecting arm I live in peace and happiness; he is my father who brought me into the world; his great age and ripe experience deserve my utmost respect; if such a one commands me any thing, be it out of love or anger or self-interest, would any one, who knows the inner mysteries of Dharma that a plighted word should always be followed by the fulfilment thereof, go back upon his promise, unless a cruel heart goes before crueller deeds? I have no talents that way; I seek to carry out, to my best, the promise made by my sire.

"He is our lord and of my mother too; he is the highest goal of her aspirations; he is the surest guide to lead her to the worlds of the Blessed. He is ruling over this vast realm for many thousands of years more justly, more righteously, than his glorious predecessors; is it seemly, is it decent for my mother to come away with me, as if she were any ordinary woman, helpless, friendless, as if she were a wife

widowed of her lord and protector? Mother, I go to the forest; pray give me leave. Engage yourself in such auspicious rites as will ensure us a safe return to your side. King Yayati was banished from heaven, but was restored to it through his unshaken allegiance to Truth; even so I shall come back to you safe and happy at the end of fourteen years. It is not in me to sacrifice unparallelled fame to kingly rule and power, won of unrighteousness. Our life here on earth is but a lightning flash in the dark cloud of Eternity; and far be it from me the desire to be the lord of the earth and stain my hands with this crime."

So the ruler of men consoled his weeping mother and resolved to start at once to the forests of Dandaka in obedience to the words of Kaikeyi; he explained to Lakshmana the motives that lay behind the course of action adopted by him and prepared himself to go round his mother in reverent salutation and have her leave to depart.

CHAPTER XXII

Lakshmana Calmed

RAMA was the absolute master of his thoughts and emotions; omnipotent Lord of the worlds, his iron will never allowed the least sign of it to escape him. None lay nearer to his heart than Lakshmana; he was never very remarkable for patience under restraint; angry fires shot from his eyes, as from the red mouth of a volcano; he hissed forth burning sighs, even as an infuriated lord of serpents. Yet Rama forgave him all, forgot all; was he not his brother, his friend and companion, the darling of his heart and sore-stricken with grief? So he turned to him and said "Lakshmana! What has become of your wondrous self-control and marvellous fortitude? Your indignation at the

king's conduct and your poignant grief on my account, bury them deep, fathoms deep in your heart. Say not, 'What! on the eve of your coronation, when every thing is ready towards it and the joyful millions on the tip-toe of expectation! Unspeakable shame it were if the installation does not come off'. It is not due to any fault of ours, to any want of courage or valor on our part. Rather should we rejoice greatly that we are chosen to fulfil our father's promise and win for him the seats of the righteous. So, stay the preparations that are afoot towards my consecration and busy yourself with such things as will enable me to carry out our father's behests. Let me see you as enthusiastic and active in making the necessary arrangements for my departure to the forest, as you are now in bringing about my coronation. My mother grieves overmuch that I am prevented from sitting on the throne of the Ikshvakus; she doubts my safe return after fourteen years. Assure her that it is but a light task for Rama to fulfil his promise to his father and return from the forest in no time; she need not vex herself for such a trifle. Wipe away her tears and bring peace and consolation to her pained heart; for I cannot bear to see her doubt and suffer.

I never knew till now what it is to cause the slightest grief or worry to my father or my mothers. Our father ever speaks truth; he never goes back upon his promise; endowed with a might and valor that never fails its purpose, he might be induced to doubt whether the high worlds of the gods are open to him if his plighted word is not kept; and is it not our sacred duty to keep away from him even the faintest suspicion of it? If my coronation be not cancelled, my heart may be pained to think that his sworn word to Kaikeyi goes for nothing; and it will wring *my* heart most cruelly. So I wish to stop the preparations towards my consecration and start to the woods this very moment.

Let the daughter of the Kekaya monarch see her hopes realised and seat her son Bharata on the throne of the Ikshvakus. It will do her heart good to see me take my way to the forest, clad in deer skin and the bark of trees, with my matted hair coiled on my head. Nothing can shake my resolve to renounce the throne and seek the dark depths of Dandaka. Pain me not further. I assure you I put this town behind me and set my face towards the abode of the saintly rishis. Look sharp.

Till now, I assigned Dharma as the sole motive of my actions; but there is a greater and nobler one. It is not Kaikeyi that deprives me of this kingdom nor restores it to me at the end of fourteen years, but the Lord. We but waste our breath in cursing her. The Lord put such a notion into her head; else why should she seek to harm me, all wantonly as you think? Know you not that I make no difference among my mothers? Each one of them is as much entitled to my love and reverence as she that bore me. Even so, Kaikeyi makes no difference between me and Bharata; yet, she could speak harsh words and cruel, to stop my coronation and banish me to the wild woods. Need I seek for any other likelier reason than that the Lord has chosen, for some inscrutable purpose of His, to change her very nature? Gifted with many a natural grace of mind and heart; with the blood of noble and mighty monarchs in her veins; adorned with compassion, generosity and other excellences that become one of her rank; why should Kaikeyi behave like the meanest of her sex, low-bred, wicked and cruel? It matters not if she speaks so to any other; but to her lord and husband! It matters not if she sends word through a maid or a slave of hers; but herself and to his very face! Would she ever dream of giving utterance to words pregnant with countless woes to me, upon whom the king and herself have lavished their

love and care till now, even to the very verge of partiality? Does she suggest it or hint it? No; she does not mince matters; she never tires of repeating it. Is it so very difficult to see the finger of the Lord in this? None dare set himself up against His will, whose ways are mysterious past understanding. I owe it to Him that this crown slips from my hands when they are about to grasp it; I owe it to Him that her heart is turned against me quite. Say not 'What is Destiny or Fate when pitted against the might of our will'? We see it not; we but trace its course through its works. There is no armour against Fate. None care to throw themselves before the resistless wheels of its car. It underlies all such inscrutable mysteries as joy and sorrow, serenity and anger, gain and loss, birth and death. Mighty sages, such as Visvamitra, bent their dauntless hearts and iron wills to stern *tapas*, agelong and unparalleled. They counted without Fate, became the slaves of their passions, lost their serenity and peace of heart and ended by falling headlong from the glorious spiritual heights they had scaled through milleniums of travail and effort. It is but Destiny that raises before our efforts an impassable barrier and saying 'Thus far thou shalt go and no further', directs our energies to some other purpose we never dreamt of. Full of this conviction, I never allow my peace of heart to be ruffled by the gusts of joy or sorrow; and this coronation, if it is cancelled, affects me not in the least.

"Do likewise; put away grief and anger from you; see that the preparations towards my installation are stopped. Let the sacred waters brought from all over the world for my consecration bath now serve me for the preparatory rites and baths towards my departure to the forests. Nay, not so; perhaps Kaikeyi may come to misconstrue it as a ruse on my part to consecrate myself secretly as the ruler of this realm. So, I will have nothing to do with these holy waters

that are, of a truth, the property of the king, hence of Bharata.

"Lakshmana! Vex not your mind in the least that we have let this kingdom and its wealth slip through our fingers. It is all one to me if I am monarch of the earth or an humble recluse of Dandaka. On better thoughts, a forest life is absolutely free from the cares, the misfortunes and the sins that beset a ruler's path; the rarest object of God's creation meet our eyes there on every side. Hence I prefer a life in the green woods to an uneasy throne.

"Lakshmana! I tell you what. No one knows better the boundless might of Destiny. It sits at the heart of Kaikeyi and prompts her to speak harsh and cruel words to us. Now, is it charitable of us to think that she had a hand in stopping my coronation?"

CHAPTER XXIII

LAKSHMANA'S REPLY

LAKSHMANA never raised his eyes from the ground, a sure sign that Rama's skillful arguments failed to make any impression upon him. He was divided between the conflicting emotions of joy that his brother was firm as a rock in his adherance to dharama and grief that he had to renounce the throne. His feelings never found expression in words; and the next moment banished even such thoughts from his mind. His brow was knotted and wrinkled in ominous frowns like an infuriated lion; he hissed forth burning sighs like a dread serpent in his narrow prison; he moved his head up and down, as if following the rising waves of his wrath; his fingers twined and untwined themselves aimlessly like the trunk of a mighty

elephant; he shot a glance from beneath his dark brows at Rama and said "It is all unseemly of you to exhibit such excitement and manifest pleasure in your exile to the woods. I understand you to say 'If I fulfil not my father's word to Kaikeyi, it is a crime against dharma. The people will naturally doubt my readiness and willingness to protect them when I make light of my father's commands.' Weaklings, cowards, lunatics and the scum of the Kshatriya race lay themselves down before Destiny to be trampled upon and kicked about. But, you are the flower of valor and royalty; you need no extraneous help to set aside the might of Destiny; your head is ever cool and your heart ever calm; then, is it just of you to laud overmuch this puny Desfiny and call it omnipotent, unassailable, invincible? Well said Brihaspati 'Destiny is the last refuge of a coward, nay, their bread-giver'. So, it is justly the god of the impotent. Man's will alone is omnipotent and Destiny flees before it. What a worthy theme of praise!

"You apprehend treason against dharma if you fulfil not your father's command. But I wonder why you fail to harbour any suspicion of these sinful creatures, Dasaratha and Kaikeyi, that seek your ruin and destruction. I will not have you say 'Are they not loyal servants of dharma?' The world is full of such scoundrels who are adepts in the art of hiding their cruelty and wickedness under the cloak of loyalty to dharma. Your pure and innocent heart never suspects them, but sees in them its own reflection. Why do you not understand that it is a preconcerted scheme of theirs to prevent your coronation? If they had not set about it long ago, why should Kaikeyi put off so unconsciously long the two boons granted to her thousands of years ago? Let me sketch you their plot. Says Dasaratha to his fellow conspirator 'Rama is, by a cruel misfortune, my first-born; and as such, has a lawful claim to this kingdom. But you

know that my heart is set upon placing your son on the throne. Alas ! the obstinate people would not sit quiet and see a younger brother crowned over the head of the elder. Well, let us seek to achieve our ends another way. I will solemnly promise before the assembled millions, high and low, to place Rama on the throne. Next you come into the game and imperiously and relentlessly demand the two boons I granted you of yore. I fume and I rage, I rave and I swear, I weep and I entreat, I curse and I scream ; but I give in after a well-stimulated fight. Rama will be banished to the wild woods for long years and Bharata will rule over the earth.' Find me any one on earth who supports the succession of a younger brother to the throne over the head of the elder. I do not care to sit patiently under this injustice. I would have you excuse me.

" You are endowed with the greatest and the keenest intellect; but in this affair you are under a misapprehension ; a distorted conception of the practice of Dharma makes you say 'I will not have this coronation; I will go to the forests; else I lay myself open to a heinous sin'. That Dharma of yours is the object of my special hatred. Dasaratha, the king of Ayodhya, is set up by the artful Kaikeyi and speaks such words as are inimical to Dharma, and utterly condemned by all people; and you, of inconceivable might and invincible valor, bow your head in submission and resolve to obey his unjust behests. What an impossible chance ! Pray pardon me if I attribute this attitude of yours to a slight, though temporary, aberration of your noble intellect. It cuts me to the heart to think that you are their dupe and take it as gospel their plots and wiles to prevent your coronation. Find me any one among the millions of this world who take your view of the discharge of duty. They are our parents ; but to the world, they are, in fact, our bitterest and most relentless enemies ; they are sheep under wolf's

clothing. Slaves to passion and lust, they seek ever our ruin and destruction; and no sane person would ever dream of obeying their commands.

"I heard you say 'Kaikeyi is not to blame, but Destiny that put this evil counsel into her heart'; it is a lame argument at best and is supremely ridiculous in my eyes. I tell you once again that none but cowards and weaklings bend themselves before Destiny. It is utterly powerless before such heroes and men of iron will as ever have their feet on its neck; it interferes not with their concerns. Bear with me yet a while and you will see an object lesson of the comparative merits of Free-will and Destiny. Man's will shall triumph over Fate and the world will learn a profitable lesson that it has wanted for a long time. You hold, and many others with you, that your coronation has been prevented by Destiny. This day you will see that Destiny flee powerless before my will. Destiny is an elephant in rut that snaps its chains like cobwebs, and, all mindless of the sharp goad, lords it over all; and my intellect is the fatal noose that will throw it down and drag it powerless and cowed to my feet. The countless myriads in the three worlds, with their lords and regents, are utterly impotent to prevent your coronation; why speak of this puny sire of ours? 'It is but good sport to hoist the engineer on his own petard'; and they who plotted in secret to prevent your coronation and banish you to the gloomy forests, shall, at my word, themselves taste of the pleasures of a forest life for fourteen years. This day shall I nip in the bud their hopes of preventing your installation and placing the crown on the head of their son Bharata. One can afford to brave Destiny and live; but has any one heard of a person brave my anger and yet survive to tell it?

"You would go to the forest? Well, you shall go, but all in good time; not now, nor for this reason. It is an honor-

ed tradition among the Ikshvakus that the royal sages rule long and happily over their subjects ; when age lays its hand heavy on them, they decide to lead the life of a hermit and make over the kingdom and its cares to their sons, enjoining them to watch over the welfare of the people with paternal solicitude. Even so will you reign over us long and happily for thousands of years and seek the solitudes of the forests, when your sons shall inherit the kingdom.

"Do you renounce the crown because our father is a creature of impulses, and the kingdom will change hands with his moods ? I take it upon myself to protect this realm, even as the shores keep the ocean billows within bounds. Nay, I swear it by every thing I hold most sacred. Let the Halls of the Heroes be closed to me in the Heaven-world if I fail in my promise.

"I pray you turn your thoughts upon crowning yourself with the materials gathered thereunto. Alone and unaided, I am more than a match for any kings that may approach us with hostile intent. These long arms of mine, are they for show ? The bow in my hands, the sword upon my thigh, the quiver at my back, are they toys, or gaudy baubles or bravado ? They are meant to exterminate our foes, root and branch. My heart knows no peace, my arm knows no rest, if any one should dare rank himself among my foes and live. My sword shall, like chain lightning, strike him down and drink his life-blood. I will treat your eyes this day to a rare feast. My good sword shall lop off the heads, the hands and the legs of men, horses and elephants until the earth is a trackless forest therewith. It shall flash and wave over the fast-falling elephants like a blazing mountain or rain clouds dark and heavy, relieved by lambent lightning. Is there any one among the countless millions that crowd this earth, who dare call himself a man and a hero if I but stand against him on the field of battle, bow in hand? Would

they not hide their diminished heads in shame and fear, as if they were so many timid women ? Now I will pierce a foe with countless arrows in rapid succession ; now I will transfix many a foe with a single shaft. I will sheathe my darts in the vital parts of warriors, horses and elephants. So let no shadow of a doubt cross your mind about my annihilating my foes alone and unaided. This day the world shall see the might and splendour of the divine weapons into whose mysteries I have been initiated. I will even pluck the crown from off the unworthy brows of Dasaratha and lay it at your feet. These two arms of mine had till now no heavier task than to be smeared with perfumed sandal-paste, deck themselves with gold and gems, give away rich gifts and costly and shield my friends and dependants from harm. Today they shall be engaged in the more glorious and congenial task of exterminating those that stand in the way of your coronation. What foe of yours shall I deprive of life and fame, friends and retainers? Your humble servitor am I, ever awaiting your commands ; what shall I do to bring this broad earth under your sway ? "

And to him replied Rama, the glory of the Ikshvaku race, " Child ! The Books lay it down that a person deserves the name of a *son* (putra) in that his parent's word is a law unto him while they are on earth ; he feeds countless men and women on the anniversary of their departure to the seats of the Blessed; and he makes offerings of food to their manes at the holy Gaya. So I will not transgress the commands of our sire ; I will fulfil them at any cost. Take my word for it that this is the path trod by the good and great in this world."

Thus did he explain, but more succinctly, his course of action and the duty that lay before him ; he wiped away the fast-falling tears of Lakshmana and brought solace and consolation to his grieved heart.

CHAPTER XXIV

KAUSALYA CONSENTS

KAUSALYA was convinced, beyond a doubt, that Rama was indissolubly wedded to his Dharma ; he would carry out the behests of his father to the letter. She kept back her tears, as ill-omened and said "You are the darling boy sent to cheer and illumine our old age, myself and your sire ; you are a stranger to sorrow and misery ; the soul of virtue and justice, you have ever a kind word and a smile for every one. How would you manage to subsist on the niggardly grains of corn scattered far between ? Your servants and slaves lead happy lives and feed upon the costly food and dainty; how could their lord and master drag on his miserable existence in the wild woods with no better fare than fruits, roots and leaves ? 'Rama is the first-born of Dasaratha ; his parent's hopes and aspirations are centred in him ; he is crowned with every grace of body and mind ; yet his father banished him from the kingdom.' Now, is it not past belief, more a fairy tale! Even if any one did believe, boundless terror would come over him to think that his turn might come at any time. Every object in creation derives its life, light and joy from you ; you are driven into exile and deprived of your birthright; now, can you find a more convincing argument to prove that Destiny is supreme, and dispenses joy and sorrow to all beings ? The grief of separation from you consumes me quite even as a forest conflagration in autumn. My wasted frame is the forest ; your absence from my side is the gale that drives it on ; my wailings and laments are the fuel that feed it ; my ever-flowing tears are the offerings thrown into it ; the burning fever of grief in my veins is the smoke that rises

form it; the efforts that bring together all these are my sighs; and *you* are the cataract that quenches it. Deprived of the welcome waters, this cursed fire grows apace and will in no time consume me to ashes. It is no wonder that a cow follows its calf. Where you go, I follow."

But Rama stopped her firmly, yet respectfully and said "Nay; do you not see that my father, already duped and humiliated by Kaikeyi, will not long survive if I go to the forests and you too abandon him? It is unspeakable cruelty in ordinary women to quit the side of their husbands; but you, the model of every wifely and womanly virtue, should never even dream of it. Your place is by my father's side as long as he abides on earth. This is the dharma of our race, sanctified by immemorial usage."

What could Kausalya reply but "Even so be it," and she the soul of virtue and duty? Then Rama set about to assuage the grief of her heart and give her strength to tread the hard path of Duty and Right. "Need I remind you that I and your good self are bound to obey the behests of our monarch? We live under his rule; we owe our life and its comforts to his protecting arm; we learn our lessons of virtue and duty from him; he is our ideal of every manly excellence; his age, his valor, his wisdom and his experience demand our utmost respect and reverence. These ten years and four shall I pass away in the pleasant woods as if they were but a second, and come back to serve at your feet for ever."

Kausalya consented all reluctantly to Rama's departure to the woods and to her stay at Ayodhya; but the recollection of her overmastering love for Rama and the perversity and wickedness of her co-wives came upon her with a mighty force and she cried amidst a torrent of scalding tears "Rama! I cannot, I dare not live in the midst of these cruel rivals of mine. Let me go with you and live the happy life of the beasts of the forests. I shall be no

drag upon you, no burden. If you are bent upon taking yourself to the forests in obedience to the commands of your father, take me along with you wherever you go."

The sight of others' grief and misery was too much for Rama to bear. But, his iron fortitude repressed all signs of it, as he feared it might interfere with the discharge of his dharma of perfect obedience to his father's commands. But, now that his mother had given her consent to his departure to the forests, he desired to soothe her grief somewhat; he betrayed the sorrow of his heart by his hot tears and said "Women know no other god during their life on earth but their husbands, no other lord. Now, his majesty is your lord and mine. So long as his protecting arm is stretched over us, we have no reason to doubt or to complain that we are helpless. Further, I see no reason to apprehend any harm or annoyance from your co-wives. Bharata, that takes my place as the ruler of this realm, is the very soul of virtue and righteousness. His greatest delight is to embody his ideals in his life; he has ever a kind word or a look for every one. And it is no wonder that he will devote himself to your service with an ever-increasing reverence and love. I charge you to see that the king feels not, in the least, the grief of separation from me. The snows of age lie heavy on his head; and I look to you to save him from this fatal grief. Women may lay by incalculable merit through vows, penances, fasts and mortifications; but the dark hells of sinners are their portion, if they are found wanting in devoted and loving service to their husbands. Worship of the gods, service to the elders, observances and fasts, they might afford to dispense with and yet enter the worlds of light through faithful service rendered to their husbands. The Holy Scriptures and the Books teach us that a woman knows no higher dharma than service to her husband; and our ancesters have trod this path.

"I am sure that you will fall a prey to cruel grief if you keep your thoughts idle and unengaged. So, arrange that saintly Brahmanas conduct auspicious rites to secure me peace and happiness when abroad and a safe and speedy return to you ; offer reverent worship to the gods and the Brahmanas with sandal, flowers, and betel. Keep yourself always occupied with baths, recitations, chants and other pious exercises ; live upon pure and innocent diet ; set your watchful heart on your lord's service ; and look forward, with joyful anticipation, to the day when I shall be with you again. Then, you will have the happiness of seeing that model of virtue and duty, my reverend sire, alive and hearty and my humble self come back to your loving arms, crowned with honor and glory."

Tears of grief coursed down the aged cheeks of Kausalya at the idea of inevitable separation from her darling son and she sobbed "You have made up your mind to exile yourself to the gloomy forests. Oh ! the marvellous might of Destiny ! My heart's delight ! I wish you a safe journey and happy return. May every good go with you. May you triumph over your foes. My mother's heart knows no peace, no rest, no joy till you are again by my side I live only when you come back to me, your plighted word to your sire well kept, your heart's hopes realised, and your sweet self covered with fame and glory. Inscrutable are the ways of Destiny that has hardened your heart to set aside my commands, my pleadings and my entreaties and to betake yourself to the dreary forest solitudes ! Flower of valor ! A safe journey to you and a happy one. Come back to me very soon and gladden my heart with your honeyed words. Alas ! I cannot endure to take my eyes from you for even a moment. Would that this passing minute see your glorious return from the forest in hermit guise !" She was at last convinced that she was

powerless to turn him from his stern purpose of exiling himself to the dreary forest; and with all a mother's love, she set about to perform the auspicious rites that would ensure him safety and happiness during his journey.

CHAPTER XXV

A MOTHER'S BLESSINGS

KAUSALYA kept down the heavy sorrow that threatened to overmaster her, sipped holy water to put away from her the impurity caused by her tears and lifted her heart and voice in a mighty blessing. "Foremost of the royal line of Raghu and the best! Powerless am I to prevent your exile to the forest; even go if you must. Come back to me at the end of fourteen years and seat yourself on the throne of your forefathers in conformity with immemorial usage. May that Dharma watch over you with sleepless eye, to the absolute and dutiful service of which you have joyfully devoted your life. I place your innocent self in the forest under the protection of the gods and the sages to whom you offer devout worship in the crossings and the fanes. May the presiding deities of the divine weapons you learnt of Maharshi Visvamitra ever guard your noble self. May your devoted service to your parents and to the God of Truth whom you reverence, shield you and lengthen your days on earth. I invoke for you the protection of the sacred fuel, the holy grass, the sacrificial halls, fanes, hillocks, trees, creepers, stunted trees, pools, birds, serpents and lions. Let the Sadhyas, the Visvedevas, the Maruts, the Maharshis, Dhata and Vidhata, Pooshan, Bhagha, Aryama and the other eleven Adityas, the deities of the seasons, the fortnights, the months, the years, the

night, the day and the muhoorthas prosper you ever. May meditation, Yoga and Dharma enjoined in the holy Books guard you on all sides. May Sanatkumara, Soma, Brihaspati, the seven Rishis and Narada keep away harm and evil from you. May the mountains on the sea-shore, the ocean, Kubera, Varuna, the heaven world, the firmament, the earth, the rivers, the stars, the planets, the planetery Rulers, the Lords of day and night, and the goddesses of twilight take you under their protection. May the Rulers of the seasons, the months, the years, the minutes and the seconds bring you peace and happiness. May the Adityas and the Daityas make your forest life a happy one. May evil never approach you from the Rakshasas, the Pisachas, the wicked and every carnivorous creature. May monkeys, scorpions, wild flees, gnats, reptiles and worms do no harm to you May you be safe from huge elephants, lions, tigers, bears, boars, bulls, and frightful bisons. May my worship and offerings go to satisfy other man-eating creatures and guard you from their clutches May peace and happiness walk before you. Your valor shall not fail its purpose, but shall achieve it to the full. May you never want for any comfort while you are in the woods May every inimical power on earth or in the sky bend their energies to compass your good. May Brihaspati, Soma, Soorya, Kubera, Agni, Vayu, the curling smoke from holy fires, and the potent spells you learnt of the Rishis, stand guard over you when you bathe in the forests. May Brahma, the ruler of the worlds, Narayana, the protector of the universe and other Rishis, protect you during your sojourn in the forests." She chanted appropriate hymns and offered due worship to the respective gods with garlands and perfumes.

Then, she lighted up the sacred fire through a saintly Brahmana and offered into it ghee, white garlands, sacred fuel and white mustard, to secure peace and prosperity to

Rama. The priest made other offerings to secure perfect health and immunity from every illness, and placed balls of food outside the sacrificial altar in honour of the Regents of the worlds. Kausalya gave away large quantities of honey, ghee, curds and unbroken rice to Brahmanas; caused the holy texts to be recited to guard him from harm when in the woods; made ample presents in coin and kind to the officiating priest and said to Rama, " Peace and happiness be unto you that attended the lord of the Devas when he stood victor over the asura Vritra and received the homage of the assembled gods. Peace and happiness be unto you that Vinata prayed for her son Garuda, when he went forth to bring down the Waters of Immortality. Peace and prosperity be unto you that Aditi blessed Indra with to aid him in his work of destruction of the Daityas during the churning of the Milky Ocean for Amrita Peace be unto you and happiness that waited upon the Lord Vishnu of boundless radiance when He set about to measure the worlds in three steps. Supreme peace and happiness be unto you through the tireless efforts of the seasons, the seas, the Vedas and the quarters." She sprinkled unbroken rice over the head of Rama, covered his shapely limbs with a rare sandal paste, tied round his arm a potent talisman of the famous plant Visalyakarani and recited appropriate spells over it.

She hid a burning heart under a face wreathed in smiles; called Rama to her side in broken accents, smelt his head, clasped him to her breast and cried " Child ! Go forth to accomplish your utmost ends. Your ends achieved, come back to Ayodhya in perfect peace of body and mind and tread in the righteous path of our ancestors; and I, Kausalya, shall live to see the happy day. I have no more apprehensions of what might befall you in the forests. I shall live to bless my eyes with a sight of your lovely face, bright as the

moon in her full, and my face will bloom with joy to see you again. I shall yet see you come back from the forests, your promise to your father well kept, and yourself ruling over the happy millions of the earth from the throne of your forefathers. Speed back from the dark forests and, adorned with the emblems and insignia of royalty as becomes the lord of the earth, gratify to the utmost the heart hopes of myself and of Seeta. The heirarchies of gods worshipped by me, the Trimurtis, the Maharshis, the elementals, the Asuras, the Uragas and the quarters will secure to you every comfort and convenience while in the woods." Rebellious tears started to her eyes while she invoked powerful blessings on his head; she went round him as a protective spell and clasped him to her heart again and again in a transport of love.

Nothing could add to the halo of glory and spiritual radiance that surrounded Rama; yet it was intensified, if possible, by a mother's sincere blessings and protective rites. The glorious champion of Dharma that wavered not for a moment in his allegiance to it even in direst distress, laid his head again and again at the feet of his mother and directed his steps to the mansion of his wife to acquaint her with the unwelcome news.

CHAPTER XXVI

"SEETA ! I GO TO THE FOREST"

AMA received the hearty blessings of his mother, saluted her in all reverence and took his way to the woods, treading the path of dharma. His noble perfections won the hearts of the people as he proceeded along the royal road, blazing in his splendour. Meanwhile, Seeta had finished the fasts and vows connected with the approach-

ing coronation of her husband and sat in joyful expectation, absolutely innocent of the cruel circumstances that prevented it. She doubted not that the happy function would come off in a few hours. Her worship offered to the beneficent gods, she awaited, with a joyful heart, the arrival of Rama amidst the royal paraphernalia of the chamaras, the umbrella of state, the throne, auspicious music, elephants, horses, chariots, infantry and retinue. For, she was mindful of the royal usage that the queens of consecrated kings should offer worship at the feet of their lords with flowers and perfumes.

Rama entered his palace and sought her presence. He bent his head a little, bowed down with shame at the sight of his servants so busily happy with the gay decorations towards his coronation. Seeta's loving eye noticed, even at a distance, the wan face and disturbed heart of her lord; she sprang from her seat in vague apprehension and trembled like a leaf to think "What has happened to my lord and husband that he comes not to me cheerful and happy but is bowed down with grief?" Sorrow and misery was a thing unknown to Rama till then. He grieved past bearing to think of the grief his news would cause Seeta. His courage deserted him quite as he said to himself "What will become of Seeta, all innocent of sorrow and misery, when I go away from here to the forest? Time will hang very heavy on her hands." He became a prey to anxiety and his face was shorn of its lustre. Drops of perspiration rolled down his body when he thought "How shall I have the heart to tell her that the crown, almost within my grasp, has slipped through my fingers and that I am condemned to a long exile?"

Seeta watched him while he battled manfully with his grief and said "Light of my life! How is it I see you cast down with anxiety on an occasion of un-

precedented joy ? Have not the saintly Brahmanas declared that the Moon dwells to-day with the star Pushya ruled over by Brihaspati ; that success and fortune crown any enterprise undertaken during the auspicious period and that the same has been chosen for your consecration ? Then, why grieve when you should rejoice ? Your countenance gleams not forth from under umbrella of state, white as driven foam and spread over a hundred golden ribs ? Where are the Chamaras, bright as the full moon or the stately swan, that should grace on either side your lotus-eyed countenance ? Why hear I not the sweet strains of bards, minstrels, heralds and panegyrists chaunting your glories in noble terms ? I see no signs of your consecrated head having been sprinkled by learned and holy Brahmanas with sacred water mixed with honey and curds, to the majestic chant of benedictive hymns! Where is your retinue of ministers of state, royal officials, heads of guilds, citizens and provincials in brave attire ? The chariot of state precedes you not, drawn by four noble steeds flashing with gold and gems ! Where is the royal elephant endowed with every auspicious mark, that should majestically walk in front of you like a huge mountain afoot, crowned with dark rain-charged clouds ? Why do they not carry before you the gem-encrusted Bhadrasana that should precede the hero ? I am sure that the preparations towards your installation are all completed. How is it that a cloud of sorrow dims the dazzling radiance of your countenance ? I do not read therein the least sign of the joy that should ever reign in your heart ". And thus she weeping cried, when Rama raised his reluctant eyes to her face and said all gently " Seeta ! My father, who is a god unto me, has sent me to the forest." But a terrible fear came over him as he thought " Alas ! Fool that I am to break upon her with this grievous news ! God knows what will become of her ;" and he set about to

soothe and encourage her. "Seeta! Daughter of King Janaka, the wise, from whom no mystery is hid! Peerless woman, to whom the dharma of kings, of castes and orders is an open book, sure and certain! Unparalleled in the perfect practice of the highest dharma! It came about thus. My sire had arranged everything to instal me as heir-apparent this day, when my mother Kaikeyi reminded him of the two boons he granted her of yore and prayed their fulfilment. He plighted his faith to her and she desired that I should abide in the forests for twice seven years and that her son Bharata should rule in my place. My sire, the soul of truth and a loyal servant of dharma, acceded to her request. I regard it has my highest duty and most imperative to see my father's promise fulfilled; I go hence to dwell in the forests for ten years and four. I come here to inform you of this and bid you farewell.

"Persons in exalted positions and in the enjoyment of boundless wealth and power find it hateful to hear another praised in their presence. Have a care that you are not betrayed into eulogising me when Bharata comes to you to pay his respects. You will do well not to expect higher respect and consideration than what is accorded to the wives of Lakshmana and Satrughana. Nor should you show yourself behindhand with our kinsmen in your affection and solicitude for his welfare. The king has invested Bharata with the powers of the heir-apparent; he is ruler over us and it is meet that we should seek to deserve his pleasure and approbation.

"I go to the dark forests and abide there for fourteen years to keep my father's plighted word. Brave heart! Need I pray you be firm and constant in your love to me? You will spend your time in pious exercises, fasts and penances while I abide in the woods among the maharshis. Begin the day with offering devout

worship and due to the bright gods ; lay your head in humble reverence at the feet of my sire and monarch. My mother Kausalya is very very old ; it is no wonder that she will suffer terribly the pangs of separation from me ; if you desire to practise the highest and the noblest dharma that could ever fall to the lot of one, devote yourself to her service. Not that you should in any way lessen your love and friendship towards my other mothers ; you should, all the more, ward off harm and evil from their side. I have, till now, received from them such rare affection and consideration ; I make no difference between them and Kausalya, the mother that bore me. Bharata is to you an elder brother and Satrughna your son. Know you not that they are dearer to me than life ?

" Never do any thing that Bharata does not approve of. He is your king, none higher than he ; he is the absolute lord and master of this realm ; he is the head of the Ikshvaku line If we bestir ourselves to consult the wishes of our kings and adapt ourselves to their likes and dislikes, we are sure of their love and confidence ; else, we incur their wrath and suspicion. They put away from them the very sons of their loins if they apprehend evil through them. Good men and faithful are ever sure of their welcome and favour whether they be of their kith or no. So, centre your heart upon dharma ; busy yourself in the practice of fruitful vows and observances ; stay here seeking to win the love and trust of Bharata. Life of my life ! I go to the forest ; I pray you abide here. I request you once more to practise the few precepts I drew your attention to, taking care not to cause harm or grief to any one." So spake Rama, as if he desired to place before her the dharma of a model wife in the absence of her husband, but in reality to know her heart and rouse her wrath and opposition.

CHAPTER XXVII

SEETA'S REPLY

NONE was ever known to speak to Seeta but lovingly, even when she spoke to him, if ever, in anger or harshness. So, it needs no saying that she was ever gentle of speech to others and kind. The cruel words of Rama and her boundless love for him roused her to quick anger and she cried "Rama! Would that your pure lips were never soiled today by such light words! I am but a girl; yet, for the very life of me, I cannot control my laughter. This is a new experience for me and one not very welcome. The first-born of the flower of the Kshatriya race, it is strange to hear you give utterance to words quite at variance with your love to me.

"Lord! A husband's father, mother, brothers, sons, daughters-in-law and kin, reap the results of their past lives and do good or evil accordingly. But a wife alone is the half of his very self and rises or falls with him. So, the order of exile to the forest includes me as well. Hear the Holy Writ, 'This wife is, verily, half of his self'. What refuge safer and happier in this world or in the next for good women? Father, mother, soul, body, friends? Nay, none of these. It is the husband and no other. Hence, I have a legitimate claim to one half of every thing yours, joy or sorrow; you are my only hope and refuge; if your feet are set towards the frightful wilds, I go before you, treading soft the sharp grass. Be not impatient with me and say 'She will come with me and enjoy rare happiness'; or 'A foolish woman this, how dare she maintain obstinately that she will follow me to the forest, when I say nay?' Be not wroth with me and say 'I advise her to stay here and lead a happy life;

yet, she will go with me at any cost. She makes light of my wishes. She persists in preferring fruits, roots and other woodland fare to the royal comforts and luxury of Ayodhya'. Put away from you impatience and anger, even as you cast away polluted water and forbidden.

"Do you want me believe that you hesitate to burden your single self in the wild woods with the safety and happiness of a woman? How can you convince me that you are anything but the very flower of valor, the god of heroes? So, you may take me with you and not feel anxious.

"Am I such a miserable sinner as to deserve to survive your departure to the forest? Nor is my soul dark with such a sin that I should expiate by being left here behind you. Take me with you to the forest and you will be the happier for it; but never will you regret the favor done me. Travellers across sandy deserts drink from their water-skins and carefully preserve what is left against a future necessity. They never throw it away and are the happier for it. Even so stake me with you.

"Ask me not 'Why do you prefer a rough life in the woods to power and pomp, comforts and luxury of royalty'? A good woman knows no higher duty than to regard her husband as her god and devote herself to his service, body and soul, be he prince or peasant, philosopher or fool. She cares not to reside in the palaces of emperors or in the ærial cars of the Shining Ones; nor can you entice her with offers of supernatural yogic powers of coursing at will through the myriad worlds.

"My parents have taught me, time and oft, my duty to my lord and husband. I have a good knowledge of the means to be pursued to secure the highest good by persons in the various castes and orders of life. So I pray you spare yourself the trouble of teaching them to me afresh.

"A happy life it must be to me in the pathless woods, the teeming home of elephants, tigers and bears, where man is not. I am sure I will abide there as cheerfully as in my father's palace, my thoughts ever centred upon affectionate service to you and caring a straw for the wealth and pleasure the worlds can give. It will be a long spell of joy to me; engaged in the vows and observances of the hermits, with restrained senses, I shall roam by your side through dark groves of honey-dropping trees, while objects rare and wonderful meet the eye on every side. An utter stranger to you has but to take refuge with you to secure your protection. Do I ask of you too much to protect *me* who know no other lord and protector? I go with you today; and when I have once made up my mind to go, heaven and earth cannot prevent me. I will thrive well upon sweet roots and juicy fruits and save you all worry on my account. Ever fearless and safe by your side, I long to behold hills and dales, mountains and valleys, forests and groves and charming lakes and pools, where swans, herons and other aquatic birds sport joyfully and to listen to your descriptions of their manifold beauties. I shall bathe with you in the holy waters and pass my days happily in the strict observance of vows and penances. Thousands of years in the forests with you will seem to me but as a moment; the bright worlds of Light are to me but a dark and noisome dungeon if you are not with me. I will follow you to the frightful wilds where foot man has never trod, where monkeys, deer and elephants roam in savage freedom. I will keep my senses under strict restraint and your holy feet shall be my only refuge. My heart is your shrine and it has no place for any other. My hopes, my joys, my affections, are all centred in you. You but condemn me to instant death if you leave me behind. So, I would that you grant my earnest prayers and take me with you. Surely, I am no drag upon you".

But Rama, ever wedded to dharma, would not hear of it ; the very thought of exposing Seeta to the wild and dangerous life of the forest was an insufferable torture to him. So he began to describe to her, at some length, the dangers and difficulties of a wild life in the woods and tried to turn her heart away from it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ROUGHING IT

DHARMA had no mysteries for Rama ; his whole life was devoted to its loyal service ; but he brought before his mind the hardships of a forest life and shrank from taking Seeta with him He saw her weeping piteously and sought to dissuade her from her imprudent resolve " Seeta ! you come of a noble line , your heart is ever wedded to the practice of dharma ; hence, stay here and discharge the duty of your race and rank. It is not good for you to follow the bent of your inclinations. Believe me, I advise you for the best. A delicate girl, what know you of the countless miseries and dangers that infest a dweller in the forests ? Let me give you a faint idea of it.

"First and foremost, a forest is a pathless tract untrod by the foot of man, where danger and harm await us on every side from sharp stones and sharper thorns, from cruel beasts and crueller birds. So, put away from you the thought of following me there. Take it not that I say this to save myself an additional responsibility and trouble; it is but your welfare and happiness that I have at heart. Sorrow and misery, hardship and privation ever haunt the depths of the forest ; happiness and comfort are utter strangers to it.

"The terrible roars of the lions in their rocky lairs are made more hideous when borne on our ears along with

the thunder of the falling cataracts. Huge beasts of prey, the lion and the tiger, range fearless in the uninhabited jungles ; the sight of man is all strange to them and they will spring at our throats as soon as they set their eyes upon us. The mountain torrents are infested with frightful crocodiles ; of immense depth and miry, they are unfordable and fatal even for maddened elephants. The forest tracts are festooned with strong creepers that trip us at every step, while cruel thorns lacerate our flesh ; water is scarce to drink ; and it is no easy task to journey through them. The screams of the wild hens are unbearably sharp and ear-piercing ; and to strangers they are doubly frightful.

"The luxury of beds is unknown in the forest ; the hard uneven ground is the very best you can have that way Soft beds of swan-down or cotton are represented there by the dry leaves that fall from trees. You have scarcely time during the day to provide yourself with the necessaries of life ; hence, it goes without saying that you have no leisure to take rest. We should even conform to the habits of the dwellers therein and stretch ourselves at nights on the bare earth. We should keep our senses under stern control, and content ourselves morning and evening with the fruits that fall from the trees. We should fast every now and then as long as we can ; wear our hair in matted coils ; dress ourselves in the barks of trees ; offer due worship every day to the gods, the Fathers and the guests ; bathe in the morning, at noon and again in the evening ; and we should omit none of the numerous vows and penances observed by the hermits therein. So the wild forest life is all unmeet for your delicate self.

Every day we should gather flowers and offer them at the altar according to the rules prescribed by the Rishis ; hence, girl that you are, a forest life is but misery for you.

We should observe the strict diet laid down in the Books for hermits and rest content with what we can get there. Fierce gales and terrible storms occur every now and then. The nights are pitch-dark. Hunger there is something to remember. Huge boas and pythons stretch themselves lazily across our paths, as also water-snakes with the undulatory motion of a river Moths, scorpions, worms, wild fleas and gnats torment us day and night. Sharp grass, reeds and thorny trees abound along our paths and cause us insufferable pain and trouble. Bodily fatigue and fear in diverse forms are the lot of those who make the forest their home. Anger, lust and greed should be sternly put aside and the mind centred in tapas and meditation. We should not give way to fear even at the sight of most frightful objects ; hence a forest life is unbearable hardship for you. Enough of your following me to the woods. You cannot live through a day of it. I could detail to you a thousand other reasons why you should keep clear of the forests and its perils."

Seeta saw that Rama was all unwilling to take her with him to the forest ; heavy grief weighed down her heart; she would have none of his arguments, but replied to him in firm though respectful words.

CHAPTER XXIX

SEETA'S REPLY *(Continued)*

WITH tear-stained eyes and a broken voice, Seeta turned herself to Rama and said "You were so kind as to describe at great length the numerous perils and troubles inseparable from a life in the forest and concluded that I could not live through it. But, if I were by your side, the life of my life, the very same dangers and horrors

would be transformed into the gentle notes of the koil, or the fragrant sandal or the soft zephyr and give me unbounded pleasure and joy. Lions and tigers, elephants and sarabhas (an eight-legged monster, the mortal foe of the fierce lion), deer, birds and the other innumerable fierce denizens of the forest will, of a truth, flee your presence. They have never set their eyes on such a curious object; and who would not be filled with fear at the sight of a frightful object?

"I have put it to you that your father and mother have laid their commands upon me to follow you to the woods. Need I remind you that my life-breaths follow you to the forest if you deny that privilege and pleasure to their fleshly tabernacle? Again, allow me to recall to your memory the words of my honoured sire as he placed my hands in yours on the marriage day before the bright God of fire. 'Seeta here will follow faithfully your footsteps on the narrow and difficult path of dharma. She will be ever with you, inseparable as your shadow.' Now, it is nothing but reasonable and just that I should follow your footsteps in living the difficult dharma of a recluse in the forest. I am content to be left behind when you cast off your shadow from you. The monarch of the Shining Ones dare not, for his very life, lift his eyes to me when you are by my side. Again, have you not exhorted me time and oft that a wife has no life apart from her husband?

"Let that be. One day, in my father's house, long before I married you, some brahmanas for whom the science of the stars has no secret, said, if I remember aright 'The horoscope of this girl prophesies for her a temporary sojourn in the forest.' Besides, I heard the same confirmed by brahmanas skilled in the science of palmistry and have been eagerly awaiting the chance. You see plainly that the forest life they predicted for me from scientific considerations is but the result of my past karma; and Prarabdha is inevitable. I

go to the forest—but with you and not alone. Now, I have the words of the truthful brahmanas for it; the likeliest chance has offered itself now; I go with you; is it not a sin to falsify the predictions of the saintly brahmanas? Again, as to your laboured description of the dangers and perils of the forest, I know somewhat; but they are not for us. Do they not refer rather to those who are not masters of their senses and mind? Further, when I was a maid in my father's house, a holy woman came to my mother one day and said 'Your daughter will have to spend, I fear, some years in the forest.' No ordinary woman, mind you, but one endowed with marvellous psychic and spiritual powers.

"Let that be. Have I not ere now entreated you times out of count that I long to go with you to the banks of the Ganga and visit the hermitages of the holy Rishis there? And, had I not your gracious reply 'Be it so. I but wait for a fitting occasion?' I am looking forward to that happy contingency every moment of my life Prince of heroes! May all good be thine. Have you gauged the depth of my desire to spend with you happy days in the forest and offer you every devoted service with my hands?

"Ideal man who knows not envy, anger and the other frailties of the earth! If I abide with you during your stay in the forest with a heart overflowing with love for you, I will be washed pure of all sins. You may say 'Will you not attain the same end by remaining here and offering devout worship to the god of your fathers?" Well, when has a good wife known any other deity but her wedded lord? I hold nothing more desirable and beneficent to me than to be by your side here and hereafter. (A woman is brought up by her father during childhood; the husband protects her youth; her children take care of her old age; verily she has no independent life of her own). I have heard wise brahmanas quote a passage in the holy Scriptures to the effect that 'If a

woman is given to a man in marriage by her parents, in conformity with the rules and regulations of her order and the traditions of her family, if she is utterly faithful and devoted to her lord during her stay in this world, she wins a place by him in the worlds of Light through all eternity.' I hope you do not take it that I teach it to you as if you knew it not; I but humbly submit that I have the sanction of the Scriptures to back my request to follow you to the forest.

"Are you still bent upon not taking me with you? Am I not your wedded wife? Have you been able to detect any flaw in my conduct or character till now? Are you not my only refuge and support, the single deity that rules my heart? Know you of any one, a more enthusiastic worshipper of yours? Have you ever seen me intoxicated with joy or prostrated with sorrow? Am I not entitled to a fair half of your happiness and misery? Are your eyes blind to the torments and agony I suffer? Why will you not see that it is but bare justice to me to be allowed to accompany you? The very thought of being away from you fills me with indescribable pain; and if you are still heartless enough to leave me behind you, I will drain the poison cup or leap into the blazing fire or seek the dark depths of the waters to end my misery."

Thus did Seeta pray and entreat, adducing many a plausible reason, many a convincing argument. But Rama was all loath to take her with him; the very idea was something horrible to him of exposing his heart's love, brought up in the lap of luxury and comfort, to the dangers and privations of the frightful woods which knew not man. Seeta was filled with unutterable despair; she watered the earth about her feet with her hot tears and stood as one dazed. But she would not yield to Rama in the least, for all his well meant efforts to dissuade and console her.

CHAPTER XXX

THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE

WHEN Seeta spoke to Rama bitter and taunting words, for she cared not to be lured into consenting to his leaving her behind him; she was resolved to secure her end anyhow. He was a paragon of valor and heroism; but he was also her own dear lord, the object of her all-absorbing love; and she was stung to the quick that he ever entertained the idea of parting her from him and at his obstinate refusal to grant her earnest and repeated prayers. "Have you any idea of what a sorry figure you will cut in the eyes of my father, should he come to hear that you had gone to the forest and left me behind you? Your supernal beauty is your sole refuge, your only weapon, your only asset, with which you steal away the hearts of us, poor women. Kindly tell me whether you have anything else about you worth noticing. Janaka, my father, is very much inclined to the Path of Action, as is plain from the saying, 'Great men, like Janaka, have won the supreme Goal solely by treading the Path of Action'; hence, he will not entertain the idea of a householder living apart from his wife even for a moment. Besides, he is not, like you, a novice in the art of government, a stranger to the joys and sorrows of others; but he is the ideal ruler over many countries and the watchful father to the countless millions that dwell in them. Should it come to his ears that you left me behind you, all out of impotence to protect a weak woman, he would most naturally exclaim 'Alas! Fool that I was to be so duped! My eyes were blinded to the truth. I have unwittingly ruined the life of my darling girl by giving her in marriage to one whom I conceived to be a man. The scales have fallen from my eyes. *He is but a*

woman under the miserable garb of a man.' Would he have ever given me to you for wife, if he had the least suspicion of the truth ?

"Alas ! What blind dupes the people are ! I hear them say on every side ' Unparalleled glory and valor adorn Rama, even as light and life abide in the sun, crowned with his thousand rays.' It is a naked lie ; it is the child of crass ignorance. I see nothing extraordinary or wonderful in Rama ; if truth must be spoken, he stands far down in the scale of ordinary men.

"Manu enjoins the head of a family to maintain it in comfort and ease even though he has to incur countless sins therein. I do not see that you have burdened yourself with any such responsibility ; have the kindness to inform me what grievous sin you have committed for my sake and repent so keenly. You are my sole stay and support, my only refuge ; I never look to any other for advice, guidance or protection. I cannot construe your unwillingness to take me with you in any other way than that you are mortally afraid of some one who is sure to cause you grievous harm if I follow you to the woods. But, who knows better than I that the fire of your wrath consumes everything that stands before it, even like the Fire of Dissolution ? I am curious to know who those wonderful persons are that cause you so much fear and apprehension.

"I request you to remember that I am your loyal and faithful servant ; your lightest word is a law unto me ; and I follow you where you go, even as Savitri, the faithful wife, followed her lord Satyavan into the dread regions of Death. Rank me not with the common lot of women who are born to ruin a noble house. My heart has, and will have, no place for any other god than your noble self. That is by itself reason enough for me to claim to come with you. I try to live the life of a faithful wife ; times out of count have I

sworn to you, by everything that I hold sacred, that you are my love, my lord, my god, my everything. Yet you advise me all seriously about my deportment and attitude to Bharata. Verily I begin to suspect you of an inhuman and base conspiracy to make me over to Bharata, even as an infamous pander or professional pimp, who makes a wretched living by hiring out to others the young confiding wife whom he inveigled into a marriage and had allowed to live with him through long years, all unsuspectingly. Rama! I freely and ungrudgingly allow you the monopoly of the favour and service of him whom you flatter, of him to whom you would make me over. I do not enter into the lists with you as a rival; I have not fallen so low; I have not been reduced to such abject destitution and misery. You *shall* not go to the forest unless I go with you. Bury yourself in the dark woods; enter the order of ascetics or recluses; ascend to the bright seats of the Immortals; I am ever with you. I care not to argue further; I care not to hear more. 'I have no other but a woman's reason. I think it so because I think it so'

"Fear not that I would feel fatigued in the least when I travel with you, as I used to do during my walks in the pleasure-gardens here. Sharp grass, reeds and thorny trees are to me but soft cotton or the finely tanned skin of the antelope, if you are by my side. The fine dust blown upon me by fierce gusts and gales will be to me as excellent sandal paste. What pleasure have I here, reclining on delicately woven rugs or carpets or cunningly fashioned couches, sofas or lounges, more than the delight and comfort I would feel when reposing on the soft emerald grass in the woods? The fruits and roots and leaves gathered by you for me will taste as sweet as ambrosia, be they enough or scanty. The flowers and the fruits of the varying seasons are mine to enjoy; no shadow of a memory of my home or

parents will ever cross my mind. I assure you I will cause you no trouble, not the slightest, when I live with you in the forests. You will have not the least difficulty in taking care of me there. My heaven is where you are ; apart from you I am in the darkest of hells. You cannot but take me with you if you have the least idea of the extent of my love to you. The very word fear is unknown to me when I go with you to the forests. If you still persist in your inhuman and obstinate resolve to leave me here, I will kiss the poison cup rather than be handed over to the tender mercies of Bharata or any other enemy of mine. Sure am I of a natural death here after your departure to the woods ; it is decidedly better for me to cast aside this unworthy body when you are by. Alas! Powerless am I to endure this sharp-toothed grief, even for a second ; ten years, then three years, then one year and, all counted, *fourteen* years of dreary darkness unrelieved by a ray of your radiant presence! Ah! What a hell ! Never can I live through it." And with senses adrift, and a heart shaken to its very depths, she fell upon her husband's neck and wept aloud, a sight to melt a statue of adamant. The words of Rama pierced deep into her soul, even as a cow-elephant in the forest stricken to the heart with poisoned shafts. Her long-restrained tears flowed in torrents, like fierce flames from the attrition of fire-sticks. The crystal drops fell from her eyes in rapid succession, even as the pearly dew drops from the blossoming petals of the lotus. (Her charming face that put to shame the spotless moon with its large and lustrous eyes, faded at the touch of the hot scalding tears, even as a tender lotus plant violently torn from its cool, watery bed).

Rama clasped to his breast his grief-stricken wife in a transport of love and chased away from her sorrow and despair by his sweet and consoling words. "Seeta! And you really believe that it matters anything to me if I had

a place in the highest heaven while you lie weeping here? As to fear, I laugh at Narayana, the self-existent One. I have no life apart from you. Afraid of taking you with me! Nay, I but seemed to refuse, since I was in the dark about your real views on the subject. You need not go to seek for any other reason. I tell you that *you are made to live with me in the forest*; a man of undaunted heart and unclouded intellect will spurn the idea of renouncing his bright fame. I will not, and the truth of it is, I cannot, give you up.

"My ancestors, the royal sages, dwelt in the forests as hermits and their wives lived with them. It is but the dharma of my line that I follow and no new-fangled notion of mine. So, come with me, even as the lady Suvarchala accompanies her lord the Sun-god.

"My sire has made a promise to Kaikeyi and has ordered me to see to its fulfilment; so, I cannot but go to the forest; go I must. Our highest dharma consists in obeying our parents and carrying out their behests. Life to me has no meaning except as its loyal and whole-souled practice. You may suggest that we may remain here and secure the highest heaven by devout worship offered to the Deity. But, unfortunately, that deity is omnipotent, independent and not amenable to the influence of those that worship him; besides, it never expresses its commands or desires to us in person. Our parents and guru are amenable to the prayers of those that serve them; besides, they command us in person. There is no reason in putting them away and preferring the deity as the object of our worship. The three worlds are open to one who devotes his life to the service of his mother, father and guru; he knows nothing purer; so, we should ever reverence and respect them in preference to others. Right speech, charity, hospitality and the numerous rites and sacrifices conducted with ample gifts pale before filial service in conferring good upon us.

There is not the least shadow of a doubt that loyal service to our parents and guru ensures for us a happy stay in the heaven worlds, wealth, knowledge, offspring and the joys of life. The great Ones, who bend all the powers of their mightly selves to the faithful service of their parents and regard it as the be-all and-end all, can have for the mere asking of it, the heaven of the gods or of the gandharvas or the Go-loka or the Brahma-loka itself. My father is the loyal servant of truth ; his feet never stray from the path of dharma. His lightest word is god's decree unto me ; and it is even the dharma followed by our ancestors.

"I was against taking you to the forest with me as I was unaware of your true inclination in the affair ; but now that I know of your unshaken resolve to share the dangers of exile with me, I am ready and willing to take you with me. It is written in the book of Fate, in the beginning of time that you are to live with me in the forest; so, come along and assist me in the discharge of my dharma. I cannot praise too high your noble efforts to accompany your husb ; it does honor to me and to my race. So, make the necessary preparations for our departure from Ayodhya. The happiest heavens is but bitter poison to me without you ; give away gold and gems to the brahmanas, and let the poor of the city have free excess to the entire disposal of our stores and provisions. Delay not, but look sharp. Let the brahmanas come first and receive from you priceless ornaments, rare cloths, curiously wrought statues and toys of gold and silver, beds and conveyances ; and their consent taken, let our servants, dependents and retainers have the rest."

Seeta was delirious with joy that her husband was gracious to her and was pleased to take her with him to the forest ; so, she set about to arrange for their departure to Dandaka. Her liberality was something inconceivable,

boundless; besides, her husband had given her *carte blanche* to distribute their vast wealth among those that might ask for it. So she began to give away profusely and without stint, gold, silver, coin, gems, corn, clothes, beds and conveyances to righteous brahmanas.

CHAPTER XXXI

LAKSHMANA'S APPEAL

LAKSHMANA had followed Rama from the palace of Kausalya and was a silent listener to the conversation between his brother and Seeta. "Alas!" said he to himself, oppressed with grief past bearing, "What a superhuman task had Seeta to obtain her husband's consent to accompany him to the forest, and she the better half of her lord, flesh of his flesh! Verily, my chances are shadowy enough"; and the thought opened the flood-gates of his sorrow-laden heart. He had no other aim or object in life than to follow where his brother led; he prayed no higher boon. He saw no other means to secure that coveted end. He was sure that there was no question of putting him away where the Lord of Universe, his brother, was concerned; and that gave him courage to take refuge in the mercy of Rama. He had sedulously cultivated the necessary qualifications to entitle him to seek refuge with the Lord and had long ago put away from him every probable and possible obstacle thereto. As a first step, he prayed to Seeta, the Mother of Mercy, the Interceder of all; through her, he clasped the feet of the Lord with boundless love and devotion—even of him who proclaimed to the world "Never shall I abandon one who sought me out as his friend. He shall know no fear from any object in creation. This is the beacon-light by

which I steer my course through life"; and prayed all humbly to be allowed to serve his lord and master as the reward of his supreme and absolute surrender to his will.

" My heart is set against your exiling yourself to the forest; but if you have made up your mind to go, may I go with you. Bow in hand and senses keenly on the alert, I shall walk before you through the trackless woods where roam the savage beasts of prey. You may travel in safety and comfort through the wood-world where diverse birds and beasts have their haunts I pray you command me to render devoted service to you in all places, at all times and under all circumstances With thee away, I care not to dwell in the supreme heaven which the Sruti calls Ayodhya, the city of the gods; I care not for Kaivalya, the life that cannot die; I care not to stretch my sway over this Brahmanda with its fourteen worlds; nay, what care I for any stage of existence high, higher or highest, when the very State of Liberation is beneath my contempt, if I had no chance of offering you my devoted service there?"

Rama tried variously to pursuade and dissuade Lakshmana who earnestly prayed to share his wood-land life with him; but, the son of Sumitra would have none of it and entreated in piteous accents "I heard you say 'Stop the arrangements that are afoot towards my coronation and get everything ready for my departure to the woods; again 'Put away grief and anger from you even as I do. Let the installation go no further'; 'Seeta! Dearer to me than life itself are Bharata and Satrughna; so, it behoves you to treat them with special care and affection, for they stand to you as elder brother and son'. I was glad to observe that you included me not therein. Hence, I take it that you have commanded me to follow you to Dandaka. Why should you forget that and stop me now? You accorded me leave at first and I, in all confidence and joy, was all afire to go; now you,

change your mind and would have me stay here. A suspicion gains strength every moment in my mind that I have somehow offended you ; else, how could you find it in your heart to stay me who rejoice in the high privilege of being your dearest companion from birth, who cleave to you like your very shadow ? I pray you solve me this."

The glorious Rama turned his eyes on the faithful Lakshmana who sued with hands upraised to be allowed to accompany him, longing to lead. " Lakshmana ! you are the dearest friend I have ; your steps stray not from the path of the righteous. You are a hero unmatched ; your heart and soul are ever centred in Dharma ; you most nobly deserve my love and affection ; I love you as my life till life shall end ; you are devoted to me in every way ; you are my brother ; you are the friend of my earliest days ; so, in no one are combined all the noble qualities requisite to accomplish my ends. If you accompany me and Seeta to-day to the woods, who will provide for Kausalya and Sumitra ? I assure you this is my sole reason for denying you now. My seeming consent to you some time ago was but a temporary measure demanded by the occasion.

" Say not ' Is there not king Dasaratha, their legitimate lord and protector ' ? Our sire of unbounded fame and glory fulfils the heart-desires of the millions of this kingdom, even as the clouds pour down the welcome rains ; yet he lies a helpless captive in the bonds of passion and has no will of his own. If Kaikeyi, the daughter of Aswapati, wins for her son imperial power, she will never heed to attend to the comforts and needs of her rivals who are stricken to the heart.

" Say not ' Is Bharata so utterly abandoned to reason and justice as to be neglectful of his duty to our mothers ?' Proud Kaikeyi has him under her thumb ; he is powerless to move hand or foot. He will have to remain an impotent

witness of the torments inflicted by his infamous mother upon her rivals ; so, it would in no way help Kausalya and Sumitra to tide over their misery, even if Bharata should be proclaimed lord of this realm.

"Say not 'What power have I to protect them ?' Watch over Kausalya as well as you can, with the sanction of our monarch or failing it, by your rare valour and energy. Follow this councel and oppose it not."

"Argue not 'Your service is everything to me. What have I to do with such as these ?' Your great love to me is best shown by your faithful and perfect service to our elders and mothers. Deeply learned in the mysteries of Dharma ! The most noble and unparalleled Dharma is ensured to you if you serve those you should revere. This is the first request I make of you and I would have you obey it for my sake. What comfort on earth have the mothers that bore us, bereft of you, me and Seeta ?"

Rama was the peer of Brihaspati himself in skilful and unassailable logic ; yet Lakshmana won his heart by his keen wit and quick repartee. So in sweet words and gentle, he began to answer the objections of his loving brother.

"Bharata is sure to respect and reverence our mothers, at least out of mortal fear that Kausalya is the mother of Rama of inconceivable might and valour ; he knows but too well that his life and safety depend on the love and attention he betows on our mothers. I doubt it not in the least. Should Bharata, raised to power and sway over this vast realm, be lured with evil-tempting pride and betray his trust or fail in the lightest detail in his devoted attention and reverence to our mothers, doubt not that I will wreak cruel vengeance on the head of that insensate fool ; nay, and all that egg him on, be they the three worlds in league arrayed. Queen Kausalya, the noble, can easily

afford to maintain a thousand such as myself. Know we not that she has made ample and liberal endowments of hundreds and hundreds of villages to her dependants and retainers? It is nothing to her to provide for the comforts of herself, myself and my sweet mother.

"I am your most devoted servant; I but pray to be allowed to render the service that goes with it. I believe I have in me the necessary qualifications of a servitor; it is utter presumption for me to suggest that in you shine the perfections that wait upon the Lord of the universe; so, my following you to the forest solitudes does in no way militate against the relation of lord and servant. You will have no difficulty in providing yourself with fruits, roots and other woodland fare. I too succeed in attaining the goal of my hopes—Service to you. With bow on my back and well-filled quiver, I walk before you through the forest tracks, with spade and basket. Every day I shall procure for you the simple fare of the hermits, wild fruits, roots, berries, corn and honey. You may take your pleasure with Seeta on the mountain brows. Your humble servant prays for the privilege of rendering you, the Lord of all and your noble spouse, every kind of service, at all times and in all places."

His words filled Rama with joy and pleasure. "Be it so" replied he "Go, bid adieu to your kin and friends and keep yourself in readiness to start for the woods. Bring me those two bows of fearful might, presented to us in person by Varuna, the Lord of the waters, at that famed rite of Janaka, the divine coats of mail weapon-proof, the quivers with their never-failing supply of shafts and the gold-chased swords bright as the noon day sun. They are preserved in the hall of the Guru of our race, maharshi Vasishtha, tended with extreme care and worship there; bring them hither for our use." Lakshmana flew on the wings of speed to take leave of his friends and kinsmen; full of the joyful

thoughts of following Rama to the forest glades, he repaired to the mansion of maharshi Vasishtha and fetched the resplendent arms kept there, adorned with many a wreath and garland, sandal paste, perfume and incense.

Rama was delighted at the sight of them and exclaimed "Lakshmana! You come in time to help me, distribute my wealth and gold to the brahmanas and hermits. There are countless men, good and true, who have devoted themselves to the service of the old and the wise. For them and for all who dwell with me and serve me well, shall I make ample provision, more liberal beyond their dreams. Go hence to Suyagna, the son of Vasishtha, and request in our name the presence of the saintly brahmana here. I would take reverent leave of all the brahmanas of this town before I turn my face towards the forests."

CHAPTER XXXII

Pilgrim Gifts

LAKSHMANA could not contain himself for joy when he heard that Rama was about to bestow his vast wealth upon the brahmanas ; besides, his wildest hopes were realized in that Rama consented to take him along. He sought Suyagna in his home and found him in the hall of fire. Bending himself in low reverence before him, he said "Friend ! come with me to the house of my brother Rama ; and you will have a chance of beholding him perform an act that none in the worlds will ever dare to dream of." Suyagna finished his morning rites and offerings to the fire and followed Lakshmana in haste to Rama's palace, rich with the wealth of the worlds.

Rama and Seeta came forward with excited pleasure to meet the wise One ; with joined hands they went round

him in reverence and bowed low, even as to the sacrificial fire that gives light and life. Armlets of gold, gems strung on gold cords, earrings, bracelets, wristlets, and many a rare stone and gem did Rama lay at the feet of Vasishtha's son. Then Seeta whispered to her husband, who raised his eyes to the sage and said "Friend! Seeta desires to make a present to your worthy lady of this garland of gold, this chain curiously wrought and this gem-encrusted zone; I pray you accept this trifle. Besides, she would request your lady to accept these bracelets and armlets of curious and marvellous workmanship, on the occasion of her departure to live in the woods. This bed, rich with gold and gems, with its costly canopy, she would add to the other gifts. Be it mine to pray your acceptance of Satrunjaya, the gem of elephants, sent me as a present by my uncle and a thousand others to keep it company." Suyagna signified his gracious consent and invoked heaven's highest blessings on the head of the noble pair.

Then as the Ancient of Days, Brahma, lays his commands on the Lord of the celestials, Rama turned to his brother with a loving heart and said "Maharshi Agastya's son and Visvamitra's, entreat their presence here; beg their acceptance of countless gold, silver, gems and kine as much as they would have, even as thrifty husbandmen water the sprouting corn with fostering floods.

"A saintly brahmana, the chief of those that study the Taittireeya Sakha of the Yajur Veda, goes over every day to my mother's palace and respectfully invokes the blessing of heaven upon her. He is deeply versed in sacred lore and in the inner mysteries thereof. Present him with conveyances, servants, maids, silks and shawls until he is satisfied. Again, there is Chitraratha, our counsellor and charioteer, who has been connected with our house for countless years; give him corn, vine, gems and robes until he cries 'No more.'

Again, there are many celibates under my protection who
have devoted themselves to the study of the Katha and the
Kalapa portions of the veda; they are too busy to trouble
themselves with providing for their earthly wants; they are
by nature slow and love dainty fare; yet they have won the
approbation of the elders by their exemplary conduct. Set
apart for them eighty carriages, filled with precious stones
and ornaments, a thousand bulls to carry the corn, two hund-
red oxen to plough their land and a thousand kine to supply
60 them with milk, curds and ghee. A numerous band of
celibates who wear sacred girdles wait upon my mother
Kausalya in hopes of getting married through her bounty;
give them every one a thousand kine to rejoice my mother's
heart." And Lakshmana dispensed with own his hands the
65 numerous gifts of wealth and corn, gold and gems, kine and
horses, as liberally as the Lord of riches.

Then Rama addressed himself to the crowd of depend-
ants and retainers who stood by and wept aloud and made
ample provision for every one of them to live happily. "I
70 look to you to take care of the mansions wherein I and
Lakshmana have dwelt, till I come again." He called to him
his treasure-keeper and ordered him to have his wealth
and treasure brought out. The servants placed it before
him in huge heaps. Rama and Lakshmana bestowed them
75 upon brahmana lads, old men and the needy until they
had enough.

Then, there approached Rama, a brahmana of the clan
of Rishi Garga and he was named Trijata. All tawny was
his body through want and poverty; he toiled in the woods
80 with axe and spade, hoe and reaping hook in hand and
maintained himself, his wife and his numerous progeny by
gleaning the ears of corn that lay in the field after the reap-
ers had left. His young wife pointed to their numerous off-
spring and said to the old man "My dear lord! How long,

oh ! how long, are we to be ground down under the iron heel poverty ? Throw aside your axe, your plough and your spade and listen to my counsel. Let us betake ourselves to Rama's presence. If it be our lot to be blessed with a little wealth, there is no wiser course than to pray of his kindness, who is dharma incarnate ". It seemed to him good advice ; and arranging his rags about him as well as he could, he and his family came to Rama's palace. No one stayed the Brahmana till the fifth block of apartments; for, his spiritual lustre resembled that of the patriarchs Bhrigu and Angiras. He approached Rama and said " Prince ! your bright fame illumines the ends of the earth. I have a large family to feed and scant living in the woods is all I can provide for them. I glean the ears of corn left in the fields by the reapers and feed these babes. Cast an eye of pity on me."

Said Rama to himself " This brahmana is the sport of poverty ; verily he has numerous offspring : I would have an idea of his desire for wealth ;" and half in jest, he replied to him with a smile " Reverend sir ! Not even the first thousand of my countless kine has been bestowed in charity. I pray you throw the staff in your hand with all your strength and the kine from here to the spot where it falls are yours."

At once the brahmana, in eager haste, wound his cloth around his loins, whirled the staff over his head and threw it with all his might. It fell in the midst of the herds of kine grazing peacefully on the farther banks of the Sarayu. Then Rama fondly embraced the brahmana and ordered the countless heads of kine to be driven safe to the abode of Trijata and said, " Holy sir ! I crave your pardon. Let not your noble heart be offended. I but desired to have some idea of your matchless strength and energy and proposed to you this curious test of it. It was meant in jest and I pray you take it as such. Command me further if I can

be of any use to you. Nay, speak freely, for, I have acquired this wealth of mine solely in trust for the brahmanas. If it should find favour in the eyes of the great Ones and be deemed fit for use by them, I am richer by boundless fame and joy." Trijata and his wife accepted the gift of kine and with a full heart and overflowing, called down the blessings of heaven upon Rama and prayed for his fame, strength, happiness and compassion to wax ever.

Next, he distributed his righteously earned wealth among his friends and dependants with every mark of respect and affection. There was none among the crowds gathered there, brahmanas, or, friends who were not brahmanas, or, servants who were neither brahmanas nor friends, or, the needy poor who were none of these, but were rewarded with presents to the limit of their deserts and desires.

CHAPTER XXXIII

"OUR PLACE IS WITH RAMA"

RAMA, Lakshmana and Seeta bestowed their vast wealth upon the brahmanas out of a full heart and proceeded to take leave of the king. Their bows, arrows, swords and other weapons had a glorious look, adorned with the garlands and sandal paste by Seeta's fair hands. As they passed along the royal road, the citizens gazed at Rama with tear-stained faces and a heavy heart from storied house, mansion, palace, tower, balcony and portico. The streets were densely packed with the mournful throng. Their beloved was proceeding on foot like any common hind, bereft of umbrella, chamara, chariots, retinue or other insignia of royalty. It was not in human nature to behold it and live. They broke forth in loud la-

ments, dreadful groans and muttered curses. "Alas! Countless hosts as ocean sand, man, horse, foot, chariot and elephant were wont to follow Rama in glittering array. And to day none other than Lakshmana and Seeta to go with him! Rama laid up untold wealth; out of a liberal heart he gave it away to the poor, the needy and the deserving; he ever fulfilled the hopes and wishes of those that clung to him; and holding it as his rule of life to serve with utter faithfulness the parents that bore him and carry out their behests, aye the lightest, he would not dream of falsfiying the promise made by his father. The denizens of the sky had scarce any glimpse of Seeta's soft and fair form; the very winds of heaven would not visit her face too roughly; and she walks along the rough road, unsheltered, open to the gaze of the passer-by. Rain, hail, dew, frost, sun and wind, what sad havoc would they not play with her gently nurtured body, artistically adorned and tinted with saffron, lac (alakta) and red sandal paste? When they go to bid farewell to Dasaratha, the good genius of the old king will doubtless assert its sway and make him say, 'You shall not go into exile.' He would not have the heart to banish Rama to the woods the dearest of his four sons. There is no man so utterly and hopelessly wicked as to drive away from his hearth and home, the son of his loins, be he the owner of one virtue linked to a thousand crimes. Then it is impossible even to conceive of any one proposing to Rama to bury himself in the forest depths, the ideal prince who steals away the hearts of every object in creation by his graces of mind and heart. Harmlessness to all, compassion, self-restraint, self-reverence, profound learning and perfect practice, these six excellences deem themselves honoured in being allowed to associate with him.

"The burning summer sun scorches and shrivels the poor things to whom water is life; even so, the faint cloud

that ruffles the calm heart of Rama or the slightest shadow of grief or misery that darkness his bright soul, reacts on the people in unspeakable calamity and ruin. As a stately monarch of the forest-world dries up and fades with its fruits and flowers if its roots are cruelly severed, the whole universe is afflicted with the affliction of Rama. For, the radiant and righteous prince is the root of all beings ; and they form the fruits, the flowers, the leaves of the Tree of Being. Like the faithful Lakshmana, we will follow Rama wherever he leads us, we, our wives, children, kith and kin. House and field, garden and cottage we shall leave and follow Rama of perfect equanimity in joy and sorrow. We will take away with us our buried wealth, corn, ornaments, horse and kine. The ruined courts, the broken doors and the mouldering walls will form a fit background to the bare seats thick with dust, the ant-hills and the haunts of the mischievous rat and the cobra of fatal beauty. Hall and court, chamber and shrine, portico and terrace will serve as the busy promenade of the beasts of the field and the fowl of the air. Not a hand to lay the dust or sweep the floor ; chant or charm, offering or incense, bright lamps or tuneful bells will no more grace our hapless tenements. The household gods will flee the spot. As when plague or famine stalks through the land, marking its path with ruined cities and decaying corpses, town and hamlet are abandoned in haste by the affrighted people, this fair Ayodhya will be a howling wilderness strewed with broken vessels and whitening skeletons. And Kaikeyi of infamous memory will hold sway over her capital in all its funeral pomp and glory. *Our* Ayodhya goes with Rama ; and *our* forest extends over where he is not. Birds and beasts from forest depths and mountain lair, the cruel tiger, the timid hare, the lion, and the elephant will quit their ancient haunts ; they will yield the pathless wilds to us to range and take this god-forsaken

city in exchange. The carnivorous tiger, the busy crow that feeds on fruit and offal, the spotted deer, the bleeting lamb and the lowing kine that know no guiltier food than emerald grass, will walk fearlessly through the deserted squares, the crumbling halls and the shattered terraces. And Kaikeyi with her precious son is welcome to rule in state and glory over the dying town. Ours be the happy lot to range the green woods in peace and comfort."

Rama heard them all, but without the least suspicion of annoyance or sorrow. With a lordly gait as of some maddened elephant, he walked on to the palace of his father that rose to the sky like the Kailas peak. He took his way through the veteran guards at every gate and came upon Sumantra sunk in the depths of hopeless despair and grief. Rama, the fountain of ineffable bliss, said to him with a smile "Friend Sumantra! May I request you to announce my presence here to his majesty."

Resolved to exile himself to the dark forests that his father's promise might be well-kept, he stood there and with him Seeta and Lakshmana to take leave of his father.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Father! Give me leave to go"

THE eternal and changeless One come down in mortal guise, strangely beautiful even as a rain-charged cloud, laid his commands upon Sumantra; he roused himself with a strong effort and sought the king in his harem. Dasaratha, in the relentless grip of a mighty grief, was sighing hot and furiously; with a bleeding heart and a confused brain. his thoughts ever ran upon Rama. Sumantra had few equals in tact, intelligence, adaptability

or keen perception; but the calamity that fell upon Rama prostrated him quite. With senses adrift, he clasped his hands in loyal devotion and exclaimed "Hail! All hail to your majesty!"; but the thought 'Who knows what the king might say or do in the madness of his sorrow?' kept him back. After a long pause, he ventured in broken accents to say "Lord! Rama, the darling of your heart, stands outside and craves leave to wait upon your majesty. That paragon of every virtue, human and divine, has bestowed his vast wealth on the brahmanas and his dependants; he has bade adieu to his weeping friends; and prays to see you before he starts to the forest I pray you admit him to your presence. The hero, crowned with each princely virtue, even as the noon-day sun girt with blazing rays, means to seek the wilds. It behoves you to see him first."

Dasaratha was by nature the soul of Dharma; no one fathomed the depths of his heart, profound as the shoreless ocean; stainless as the akasa that pervades all, pure and impure, he appeared to be immersed in the joys and sorrows of the world, but was in reality supremely unattached and dispassionate. His duty at the moment lay in keeping his promise to Kaikeyi; and he called out to Sumantra and said "Go, bid my wives here come to me on the wings of speed. With them I would even behold the face of my darling, whose heart is ever loyal to Dharma."

Sumantra sped to the inner rooms and said to the wives of the king "His majesty commands your immediate presence before him". And the three hundred and fifty wives of Dasaratha, preceded by Kausalya, wended their sorrowful way to their husband's presence, with wan faces and lack-lustre eyes. Dasaratha saw them approach and bade Sumantra bring in his son. Rama, Seeta and Lakshmana were accordingly led into the presence of the monarch. The king saw his darling child approach him with folded

palms and bowed head of reverence when yet far off and sprang to clasp him in his arms. His wives ran after him with hollow looks of grief. The cruel tears blinded his eyes and the unhappy father could not see his way to where his son stood, but fell to the ground and fainted a few paces off. But, quicker than thought, Rama and Lakshmana caught him in their strong arms. The royal ladies were sore affrighted at the sight of their senseless lord and wailed "Ah! alas!'; they beat their heads and breasts in a transport of grief. Their wild laments made discordant music and hateful, blended with the melodious tinkling of their ornaments. Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta gently bore the king to his bed and did everything in their power to bring him back to his senses.

Restored to life and feeling after a while, the unfortunate monarch, battling in despair with the mighty waves of grief that threatened to overwhelm him, observed Rama standing before him with reverently folded palms. Then the prince addressed himself to the mighty ruler of Kosala and said "Your majesty is our lord, our guard; I start for Dandaka even now and crave leave of you and your powerful blessings I tried my best to dissuade Seeta and Lakshmana from following me to the woods. My truthful pleas were of no avail and they are obstinately bent upon seeking the forest depths with me I pray you cast this sorrow from your heart and give me leave to go."

Then Dasaratha lifted eyes of shame to the bright and cheerful face of Rama, who eagerly sought leave of him to speed to the dreary forests, and said in faltering accents "Rama, I granted, in an evil moment, some boons to Kaikeyi and have been greivously duped in return. All my acts are unjust and unreasonable. I am no more master of myself. Set me aside and rule over this Ayodhya in my place."

What profound thoughts and deep motives lay back

of this apparently incoherent wail of Dasaratha of profound intellect ! But Rama stood peerless in his knowledge and practice of the innermost mysteries of Dharma. Would he fail ? Would he be a prey to lure and delusion ? He clasped his hands in low reverence and replied "Lord ! May you live long and reign over this happy earth for thousands of years. I go to reside in the woods. It shall never be said that you fell away from truth for the sake of my unworthy self. Nine years, then five, will pass away in the twinkling of an eye, a happy trip. My word kept, I hope to be blessed enough to lay my head at your feet and serve you ever."

Bound by the mighty though invisible chains of Dharma in the guise of his plighted word ; goaded without rest by the tireless Kaikeyi, who ever hissed into his ear, " This day Rama shall sleep in the woods. He shall not lay his head in the haunts of men"; anon struck to the heart, past bearing, with the grief of parting from his darling child, dearer to him than life itself, he cried with streaming eyes and broken accents " Rama ! go if you will. May you win hereby the highest good and happiness in this world and the next. May every good walk before you during your stay in the woods. May no harm come to you nor fear, from the beasts, the birds and the insects of the forests. So, go in peace and safety and come back to me in a trice. Your righteous soul never knows what it is to prove disloyal to truth ; your heart is ever centred in the practice of the highest Dharma ; and would any one seek to shake your resolve, deliberately and consciously made ? But, I will not hear of your leaving us to-night, nay, not in the least. Spend the night with us ; bless our aged eyes with the sight of your bright and lovely self. Let every comfort and luxury be yours ; and you may take your departure, if you must, by break of day. Let us at least have the pleasure of being with you, be it for one short night. Darling ! My hair stands on end with

amaze and fear when I contemplate, from any standpoint, the course of action you have sternly chosen to adopt. You had the heart and courage to put away from you every comfort and luxury in life, that is yours by right and had dared to betake yourself to the howling wilderness untrod by man. I swear most solemnly upon Truth that this is not of my doing; my heart countenances not this act of cruelty and shame. Cast your eyes on this Kaikeyi that stands at my elbow, like a smouldering fire under its white robe of ashes. Her brain can hatch schemes and plots of diabolical cruelty; her heart knows not virtue or compassion; she has basely taken advantage of the boons I granted her of yore; she has played upon my loyalty to Truth and my infatuation for her to wring my reluctant consent to this act of shame. She came among us to foul the fair name of our race and uproot the righteous traditions of our forefathers. The boons she has cozened out of me have been her weapons to seat her Bharata on the throne and send you to the dreary woods. You would even obey to the utmost the unholy commands of this wretch. Ah! What magnanimity of soul! What unapproachable nobility of heart! Nay, I am denied even the pleasure of thinking so. You are my first-born and your hands should lead me across the dark realms of death to the bright worlds of light. On you rests the heavy responsibility. It is no wonder that you should see to it that your father breaks not his plighted word, does not stain his soul with a lie. And no one has a stronger claim to it than you."

Rama and Lakshmana heard their sire entreat them in heart-rending accents to stay there for a night at least; they grieved unspeakably to think that they were not fortunate enough to rejoice in the company of their parents yet one more night. Then Rama replied to Dasaratha and said "Lord! If I indulge myself this night here in

comfort and luxury, pleasure and pomp, where shall I look for them tomorrow in the woods ? I prefer to depart to the woods than taste of the sweets of royalty for a few hours. Here do I renounce this broad earth, the countries on it and the people, corn and wealth ; give it to Bharata. I have made up my mind to abide in the woods and my resolve is unshaken. You are known all over the worlds as one, whom none seeks in vain. Pleased with Kaikeyi and rightly so, you have granted her some boons; keep them to the very letter. Let your fair fame be undimmed that your word was ever well-kept. I will reside for ten years and four among the hermits, trying to fulfil your promise to Kaikeyi.

" Woe is me that I should live to hear from your lips such cruel words as 'Set me aside and rule in my place !' What atrocious sin ! This very moment Bharata should be invested with the lordship of this earth without the slightest delay or hesitation. Never should your heart harbour the faintest suspicion of any desire on my part to rule over this kingdom, to taste of its pleasures. Would I gain thereby the merit and the happiness that accrue of carrying out your majesty's behests ? Why should you grieve at all ? Why shed tears ? The Lord of the rivers, the Ocean god, is he ever known to be disturbed, unsettled ? This realm, its luxuries, this power, this pomp do stink in my nostrils ; I want them not. Nay, my Seeta or the bright world of the gods, or dear life itself have no charms for me ; I am alive to one thing, and one only—your plighted word shall never go for naught. You are my lord, my living god. I swear before you on the merit I have laid up till now, on the truth I speak. It is not in me to stay here a moment more than is absolutely necessary. It is not seemly that you should grieve over this ; my resolve to live in the woods is unshaken.

Besides, I go to the woods not solely to carry out your commands. Have I not passed *my* word to Kaikeyi

that I would go to the forest? Should I not keep it? You need not grieve in the slightest at the imaginary difficulties and dangers of our forest life. Our days will pass away all merrily in the wood-world teaming with beasts and birds of infinite variety. A father is the god of gods. So, I regard you as my highest deity and desire to obey your behests. You are sure to see me here at the end of fourteen years. So, it is extremely untoward that you should grieve over me now. The whole world looks up to you in supreme confidence to wipe away its tears and infuse courage into its heart to bear up under woes and calamities; and whom shall it turn to, if *you* give way to sorrow and despair? This town, this fair Ayodhya do I renounce; give it to Bharata. This broad realm, this Kosala do I renounce; let it be Bharata's. This earth and all it contains do I renounce; let Bharata hold sway over it. This very moment I depart hence for the woods to lead there a happy life and keep your plighted word ever true. You will not see me here until that promise is redeemed. This earth with its mountains, rivers, corn, wealth and people; let Bharata rule happily over it. There is not in my heart even the suspicion of any hankering for it. I should see that your word to the queen Kaikeyi is well kept. My heart turns away from selfish comfort, or unparalleled power and pomp. It ever yearns to discharge the dharma so highly lauded by the great—fulfilment of a father's promise. Hence, it is absolutely unreasonable for you to grieve on my account. What shall it profit me, this kingdom, its power and pleasures or Sita or my life itself, if, through me, your plighted word is kept not? Well, your promise shall ever be accomplished. You need not even dream that my life in the forest will know any sorrow or privation.

Sweet fruits and roots will be my diet; mountains, rivers and lakes will delight me untiringly and enable me to pass days of joy in the variegated forests."

Thus did Rama seek to console the broken heart of his father, who essayed to clasp his darling son to his heart and fainted away from sheer grief. His wives were horrified at the sight and lifted their voices aloud in wailings and lamentations. Even Sumantra, the old and the staid, wept aloud and fainted away, so mighty was that wave of sorrow. The whole place resounded with groans, moans, wails and laments; but Kaikeyi's iron heart was never touched and her face lost nothing of its increasing brightness and joy.

CHAPTER XXXV

SUMANTRA REPROACHES KAIKEYI.

SIGHING hot and fierce, Sumantra shook his head in quick impatience; he dashed his palms together in wild wrath; he gnashed his teeth; his eyes shot fire; and unspeakable grief banished the colour from his face. Well he knew that Kaikeyi had lost the love of Dasaratha, every atom of it; he shot his fiery shafts of censure and reproach at her heart and laid bare her wickedness and wiles. "Cruel woman and heartless! His majesty Dasaratha here is the lord of this broad earth and its countless millions. Your lord is he and besides, the husband that clasped your hand in holy wedlock. Him have you slighted and deserted; there is no saying what atrocity you will not commit. You have foully murdered your husband; and it goes without saying that it is only a question of time with you to do to death every member of your doomed race. His majesty,

Dasaratha, is no ordinary mortal, no common king. Easier to vanquish Indra, the lord of the celestials; a lighter task to shake the Himalayas to its roots; a more hopeful enterprise to disturb the mighty ocean to its very depths. Yet, your fiendish arts, your cruel words and crueller deeds wring the heart of that peerless emperor, Dasaratha. Nay, this reason alone is more than enough. He is the brightest jewel in the diadem of the Ikshwaku line. He is a hero of heroes. He is your lord and protector; your atrocious boons, he has granted them without a murmur, without a pang of regret.

"Let be; is he not the husband that grasped your hand in solemn promise in the presence of the God of fire? Your sins and your virtues lie on him and he is accountable for them all. Seek not to slight such a one, for, it will exterminate you, root and branch. A good wife and true may put away her sons; but, it is a heinous sin to stray from the footsteps of her husband on the path of dharma. Verily, millions of sons count for nothing with a woman before her husband.

"It is a tradition in the royal line of Ikshwaku that the eldest son sits on the throne of his father. But, you seek to violate that royal usage and custom, even during the life of his majesty. Well, let your son rule over this broad realm; let him please himself with the semblance and power of a king; and we will follow Rama wherever he goes. It is a very fair and charitable inference from your rapid and successful progress on the path of wickedness that no brahmanas, no good men or great will ever darken your kingdom even for a moment. It is an inconceivable wonder to me that this too patient earth does not cleave in twain and whelm you in the lowest depths of the nether worlds, you the foul perpetrator

of many an unspeakable horror. It passes my comprehension to think that Vasishtha and the other Brahmarshis of boundless might do not consume you to ashes with their words of power, more fatal than the blazing rod of Death. Your hellish obstinacy to drive Rama to the dreary forests deserves that and far more. What a marvel of intelligence must he be, who uproots the fragrant mango tree bowed down with luscious fruits and grows with infinite care and trouble, the bitter margosa tree, enriching it with rare manure and watering it with sweet milk! What a marvel of intelligence and wisdom is our monarch Dasaratha, who exiles to the dreary forests, all unjustly, Ramabhadra, his eldest son, the fountain of every virtue and excellence and takes infinite pains to win a smile from your wicked self!

"A fool I am to accuse you; as well expect a margosa to drop honey. The daughter takes after the mother. You but inherit what your mother had and no more—her doubtful virtues, her confirmed vices. It is an open secret that she that bore you is a monster of wickedness. In the old days, a Gandharva instructed your father in the knowledge of the language of birds, beasts and insects. Their hearts were an open book to him. One night he was reclining on his couch and happened to listen to the talk of the ants that were marching on the floor below. It was so funny that he laughed loud and long. Your mother, who was by his side, took it that he was laughing at her expense and turned upon him in fury. "Sir! What provoked you to laugh now? Let me have the bare truth and nothing else." "It will give me great pleasure to oblige you" replied the king, "but, unfortunately, I will be a corpse the next moment. I hold the secret on that condition."

"I care a straw" rejoined your mother "for you. Die or live, it is all one to me; but you shall tell me what provoked you to laugh at me." The Kekaya king was in a fix; he hastened to the Gandharva that taught him the secret and asked his advice on the matter. "You are an ass" said his friend "to concern yourself for her. Let her die or drown or burn or blow herself to atoms. Never yield to her obstinacy and draw down evil and misfortune upon yourself." Then a heavy weight was lifted from his heart; he gave your mother such a chastisement as she would never forget and drove her away from his kingdom; and his life since has been one of unalloyed peace and happiness. You but tread in the footsteps of your wicked and infamous mother and hound on your poor husband and king to stain his hands with heinous crimes. What says the man of wisdom? 'The girl takes after the mother and the boy after the father.' You are but one more proof of the truth of the saying. Cast away your pig-headed obstinacy; heed well the commands of your lord and husband. Allow the coronation of Rama to proceed; let your heart go out in sweet compassion to the whole created universe, animate and inaminate; save them from danger and death. Shut your ears against the whispered counsels of black-hearted wretches; do not drive your husband to violate the fair traditions of the noble line of Ikshwaku and place the crown on the head of the younger while the elder and the lawful heir is unjustly put away. Say not 'Well and what of my hard-won boons?' King Dasaratha is the soul of virtue; he is the lord of boundless wealth and riches; he is the flower of valour and heroism; he holds sway over this broad earth and all it contains; if at all he has a weakness, it is but his extreme compassion; and would *he*

plight his word to you and fail to fulfil it? See, he is willing and ready to give you in its place as much as you will have of gold, silver, gems, ornaments, corn, countries, servants, retainers, and conveyances. Pray, give leave to place the crown on the brows of Rama even now. He is the first born of our emperor; he stands unrivalled in knowledge and skill in the affairs of state; his character and conduct is faultlessly pure; he practises the dharma of the Kshatriyas–to overthrow the wicked and exalt the saintly; his watchful care protects all beings even as himself and sees that discomfort danger come not near them; he is an ideal hero; let him receive this kingdom at your hands as a gift of love.

"Know you not that dire shame and disgrace will dog your steps for all time, if, through, you, Rama be torn away from the side of his aged sire and condemned to a dreary exile in the woods? Would the subjects of this realm have over them any other ruler but Rama? If you seek to force their allegiance, you will depopulate the kingdom in a moment. So, let not your heart be afflicted with vain longings. Let Rama and no other be our king. If you will have him crowned, Dasaratha will retire to the forests even as his forefathers did before him."

Thus did Sumantra speak to Kaikeyi in her husband's presence, now gently, now in harsh and cutting words; he tried every art of persuasion, of eloquence, of censure, of menace to turn her from her fell purpose. But his exhortations, his taunts, his entreaties were utterly powerless to bring the slightest repentance to her heart. Fierce anger convulsed her features all the more; her obstinacy was made more obstinate, if possible.

CHAPTER XXXVI

SIDDHARTHA REBUKES KAIKEYI.

FINDING that Kaikeyi paid not the slightest heed to the well-meant advice of Sumantra, the king was overcome with grief at the thought of his unwitting boons to Kaikeyi and their terrible consequences; he turned to his faithful minister amidst a storm of sighs and tears and cried "Order our armies, chariot, elephant, horse and foot, to accompany Rama wherever he goes. Let such high-bred courtezans go with the troops as steal away the hearts of men by their beauty, words and acts; as also merchant princes, the masters of millions. Send along with the troops such as depend on Rama; also those with whom he spends his leisure in testing their prowess and skill, with every convenience and comfort their heart could desire. Let diverse weapons and countless wains with oil, ghee and other household goods filled, follow him to the woods, while foresters and hunters, famed for woodland skill, clear the path. He shall hunt lion and elephant, tiger and boar; drink the fast-flowing honey, bathe in many a holy stream and rivulet, and put away from his mind this kingdom and its concerns. Let my wealth of gold and corn be despatched to where goes Rama. Alas! How could my darling boy, delicately nurtured, fare in the wild forests untrod by the foot of man? He shall have a happy life of it there in the company of saintly sages and holy hermits, and perform countless yagas in each pure spot, with ample largess given. Bharata, the thrice-fortunate, shall reign over Ayodhya in pomp and glory; and my darling boy Rama shall depart to the woods in royal style."

Kaikeyi heard this and mighty fear held her heart in its relentless grip; terror tied her trembling tongue; her face lost its colour and freshness. With a heavy heart and bloodless cheeks, she turned to Dasaratha and cried, "Ideal king! And so, Bharata is to receive from you an empty realm, while the people, the troops, the wealth and corn, the treasure and all that goes to make life worth living goes with Rama, even as one who tastes the light foam and life of a heavenly drink and hands over to his best friend the lees and dregs, all dull and dead. Good sir! Kindly save yourself the trouble; the noble gift had better be with the nobler giver;" and she spat her venom at him, while the cruel words hissed forth from between her set teeth.

Untouched by shame, abandoned to all finer and nobler feelings, she pierced the heart of her too-confiding husband with her barbed tongne. But, the poor old king could but wring his hands in despair and wail plaintively, "Crueller than the venomed fangs of the deadly cobra! I sink under the crushing load of grief and misery; and you, tiger-hearted, spur and goad me to death! Goodly boons I gave you and got in return the curses of every object in creation, by consenting to exile Rama to the woods and crown Bharata instead. Wretch! See you not that I am fulfilling your diabolical purpose to the very letter? Why torture me further?"

Then, Kaikeyi turned upon him with withering contempt and said with a cruel smile: "Pray enlighten my ignorance; I see not how I pain you or cause you the least discomfort. Look here; I but pray you fulfil me the promises made by you of yore all voluntarily, out of a grateful heart; do I ask any favour of you? Speak the truth righteous king!"

"Base-minded wretch!" cried Dasaratha "you ought to have anticipated all this and secured your boons accordingly. Why did you not ask me definitely not to send away from the kingdom its people and its wealth. You but want this realm for your precious son. Take it and stop at that. Your were stupid enough not to perceive the turn the affair would take; and now, not all your howlings, your tears and your curses could divert the consequences."

The unwonted wrath of the weak and uxorious king roused the slumbering fury of Kaikeyi. "Man! This to me! You do well, noble monarch, to boast of your high lineage and spotless fame to *me*. Know I not the worthy traditions of your line? Your ancestor Sagara, of happy memory, drove his first-born Asamanjas out of his kingdom, alone and unpitied. Rama deserves nothing better at your hands. Nay, it is so beautifully consistent with the royal traditions of the progeny of Ikshwaku. I should have defined the terms of my boons, is it? I believe it is open to me to do so now or at any time. Know you of any limitation thereto?"

Dasaratha could but stare at her in fear and wonder. "Alas!" said he to himself, "Is this a woman I see before me or some cruel fiend broken loose from hell? Basely did she dupe me to grant her boons and swear it by the most solemn oaths. She made me soil my hands with the most frightful and hideous crimes; and not content with that, she would wring from me now conditions never dreamt of before." A storm of anger shook him to his very depths and he cried, "Fie, fie! Silence! Enough!" Every one there hung his head in shame and sorrow; but Kaikeyi, bold and wicked, heeded it not in the least.

Then Siddhartha, a wise and faithful counsellor of Dasaratha, was inflamed with ire at the shameless words and fiendish wickedness of the favourite queen of the monarch. The snows of age lay heavy upon his head, replete with the hoarded wisdom of ages; Dasaratha held himself proud to honor him highly, for his utter candour and straight speech won the heart of the king. The cruel taunt flung at Rama was too much for him and he cried, "Asamanjas, the cruel, laid his hands on the children as they played in the streets, flung them into the foaming flood of Sarayu and clapped his hands in glee as he watched their frantic struggles for life. The citizens one and all were furiously incensed against him, and said to Sagara "Lord! If you have the welfare of this realm at your heart, choose well. Drive forth your son Asamanjas from your dominions; or witness our departure to other countries." And to them replied Sagara "Well, what is the matter with you? What fear you?" The people said, "Your first born Asamanjas is afflicted with a homicidal mania. He lays his hands on our children as they play in the streets, casts them in the roaring waters of the Sarayu and laughs at their death-throes and the bubbles that rise up as they sink." Sagara bowed to their wish and banished his son Asamanjas, his wife and his people from his kingdom for ever. Asamanjas atoned for his heinous sin by leading a homeless life in the forests and the mountains with spade and basket, hoe and axe. [It is still reported in Belgaum that Appay Deasy was wont to amuse himself "by making several young and beautiful woman stand side by side on a narrow balcony, without a parapet, overhanging the deep reservoir at the new place in Nipani. He used then to pass along the line of trembling creatures, and suddenly thrusting

one of them headlong into the water below, he used to watch her drowning, and derive pleasure from her dying agonies—History of the Belgaum District by H. J. Stokes M.S.C.] Now what crime, what sin do you impute to Rama? Why would you banish him to the woods? The furthest reaches of our memory show not any fault, any blot, any stain with which we could connect his name. Easier task it were to discover foul blot or dark stain in the resplendant Queen of Night. Let be. Rama might be guilty of some secret sin or dark vice. We know it not; perhaps your keen eye might have pierced to the depths of his heart and brought it to light. If so, let us know; Rama shall be driven out of the kingdom this very moment and you will have won our profound gratitude for all time. But if one walks upon the path of the righteous and carefully refrains from causing harm or evil to his fellow-beings, it is but suicide to abandon him basely; it is a wanton and unholy defiance of the great Dharma. Be he gifted with the strength, the valor and the splendour of the Lord of the shining Ones, he would be but a heap of ashes should he lend himself to such fiendish cruelty. So place no bar in the way of Rama's coronation. Would you lay yourself open to eternal infamy and have the world point its finger of scorn at you?" And so, he tried by many a skilful argument; by many a persuasive appeal to her pride, vanity and self-interest to dissuade her from her fell purpose.

Dasaratha was convinced beyond any doubt that she would never heed the good counsel of the wise man; overwhelming grief choked his voice as he cried: "Sinful wretch! Siddhartha's golden words find no favour with you and grate on your ears. Alas! you see not what would conduce to the ultimate good and happiness

of your husband who confided in you too well! Let be. Know you what tends to *your* good? Base counsel and baser act come easy to you. Yow have nothing in common with the good and the great in thought, word or deed. I put away from me this kingdom, its wealth, its pomp and luxury and go with Rama. May *Emperor Bharata* rule over this realm *long* and *happily*, with you to share his power and confidence."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

VASISHTHA REBUKES KAIKEYI.

BUT Rama would not have any one come between him and his duty; he would not have it said "Rama was only too eager to obey Kaikeyi's behests, because, he knew full well that there were others who would argue with or entreat, or beg, or bribe or coerce or cozen Kaikeyi into freeing him from his promise." So, he turned to his sire all meekly and said, "Lord! I have put behind me power and pomp, comfort and luxury; my heart seeks them not. My home is in the forests; what have I to do with troops or treasure? It is only a fool who makes another a present of a lordly elephant and refuses to part with its heel-ropes. Verily the rope would be no greater strain on the resources of one who could afford to give away an elephant. Every thing that you intend to give me or send with me to the woods I have already made over to Bharata. Let my attendants bring me the dress of bark I should put on. Twice seven years should I dwell in the merry woods. Let baskets, spades and axes be brought too."

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Kaikayi, all untouched by shame, handed him the bark

and said, "Here it is. Let me see you put it on." Rama received them all respectfully from her, put away his gorgeous robes and donned the dress of bark that lowly hermits affect. Lakshmana was no whit behindhand. Dasaratha, their king and father, gazed at the scene with eyes from which all light and reason had fled. Then Seeta cast her eyes on the uncouth garb that was given her and, used as she was to gemmed robes of priceless worth, trembled even as a lonely fawn at the sight of the hunter's net; she knew not how to put them on and looked upon them in surprise and confusion. But a true wife and loyal, she would faithfully walk in the footsteps of her saintly husband; she turned her tear-dimmed eyes to Rama, who shone in his divine beauty even as the king of the Gandharvas and said, "Lord! I am ashmed to confess my ignorance. I would give any thing to know how the holy hermits in the forests adjust these coats of bark." She tried, all awkwardly, to fit a strip round her neck and blushed in shame at her failure. At once Rama took it for her and fitted it upon the dress of white silk she wore.

Rama, the first-born and the heir-apparent of Dasaratha, the mighty Emperor of Kosala, adjusted with his own hand the dress of bark that hermits wear, round the shoulders of Seeta, the daughter of king Janaka. That dreadful sight was too much for the royal ladies, and they raised their voices and cried "Alas! what horrible sin have we to expiate, that we are made to witness such unheard of atrocity? Rama! your father laid not his commands upon Seeta to betake herself to the woods; nor, did that devil in human shape ask it of him. So, grant our request that she remain with us till you come back from the forest in

fulfilment of your word to your father. Let Lakshmana go with you if he must. Is she fitted in any way to lead the rough life of the forests which knows not man, even like the hermits and the anchorites that seek it of their own choice? You are cruel enough to us in not deigning to bless our eyes and heart with a sight of your fair self here; temper your cruelty with mercy by leaving Seeta with us. We entreat you to grant our prayer anyhow." But Seeta was sore afraid that Rama would snatch at this excuse to leave her behind; so, she made haste to importune him to fit on her the dress of bark. And Rama did so.

Then Maharshi Vasishtha, the venerable guru of the royal line of Ikshwaku, grew wroth when he saw Seeta's fair form enfolded in the rough coat of bark and exclaimed, "Kaikeyi! Lost to all sense of duty! Evil hearted! Evil fate to the race that bore you and to the race that took you in! Is it not enough that you cheated vilely your lord the king? You would give free reins to your dark schemes and wicked desires, an utter stranger to every thing good and noble. Seeta shall not go to the forest, but shall rule this realm from the throne that is Rama's by every right. The Holy Writ declares that the wife is one half of the husband; and it is but right and just that she be the lord of this kingdom in the absence of Rama; but, if she would have it not, and would follow Rama to the woods, let us all go with her. Let the officers of the Government and the common people follow Raghava wherever he goes and take with them their wives, children, wealth, kine, horses, servants and conveyances. Bharata and Satrughna will, I am sure, follow their brother in his exile and render him dutiful service, clad in bark mantles, hermitwise. Then this broad realm will be untrod by

human feet. 'You will be the proud monarch of all you survey. The stately trees, the beasts and birds will keep you sweet company. None shall dispute your right. From here right to the confines, you will be the lord of the fowl and the brute.' You are wickedness incarnate. You .have come among the people here as the dread messenger of death. It is no kingdom where Rama is not. Ayodhya goes with him.

"If Bharata were the son born from the loins of Dasaratha, he will not fail to take after his father in principle and practice. Would he consent to rule over this kingdom that is wrung from his father, from his brother and from the countless millions all unwillingly? Would he have the heart to call you his mother? Would he dare to live by your side, the foul murderess of his father and your husband? Would he take the kingdom from your hands when he knows full well the royal tradition that the younger brother does not take precedence of the elder on the throne of their race? It is even possible that you take a flying leap from here to the highest point of the sky and alight safely; but it is utterly impossible that Bharata will ever swerve, even a hair-breadth, from the strict line of dharma. You pile sin upon sin, crime upon crime only secure to your precious son the utmost of power and wealth. Lo! The scales will fall from your eyes and you will see that you have wrought him but destruction and woe. Would Rama depart for the woods and any object in creation lag behind? Behold, Kaikeyi! The very beasts, birds and trees will gaze fondly on Rama as he passes by them on his way to the forest. This day shall you behold the miracle with your eyes. So, snatch the ugly dress of bark from the fair hands of Seeta and give your daughter-in-law priceless robes and ornaments.

Why should she bind on the mantle of the woodland folk? Dark-hearted daughter of the goodly king of Kekaya! your boon but compasses the exile of Rama and of no other. So, Seeta shall, if she so desires, accompany Rama to the woods surrounded by her usual comforts and luxury. Her retainers and conveyances, her costly robes and priceless ornaments shall go with her and every thing she might desire."

So spake Vasishtha of immeasurable greatness and might; yet, Seeta would not be turned aside from her resolve to adopt the life and habit of her husband. Her heart was bent upon living in the forest in hermit-guise like her lord and husband.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

DASARATHA REBUKES KAIKEYI.

SEETA, the beloved wife of Rama, the lord of the universe, stood there clad in the rude dress of bark like any waif or outcast. Every one there, man and woman, rich and poor, gentle and simple turned to Dasaratha and cried, "Fie, fie! shame upon you, king! Right noble is your act and all worthy of your line and state." Sixty thousand years had he reigned over them as an ideal king, fulfilling the dearest wishes of their heart. His ears had been accustomed to hear nothing but unqualified praise of himself from their lips. The unwonted censure and condemnation from those nearest and dearest to his heart was more than he could bear. "What have I to do with life or fame or dharma hereafter? I care not what befalls me or others, now that the world has cast me out as branded with such infamy!" He heaved hot sighs and cried out, "Kaikeyi!

wickedest wretch! Seeta shall not proceed to the forest in the garments of a devotee. Of tender youth, gently nurtured, brought up in the lap of luxury and comfort, it is but true what the holy Vasishtha said that she is all unmeet to share the hardships of a forest life. Of utter purity, she knows no other observance, no other vow than to follow in the footsteps of her lord and husband. A stranger to all guile, whom has she harmed in thought, word or deed? The favourite child of the royal Janaka, how has she sinned that she should wander in the frightful forest, clad in the rough garb of hermits? Let her fling away far from her the uncouth raiment you have so kindly presented to her. Dare you assert that my boon to you included this? If she is inclined to follow Rama, let her go in all the splendour and luxury of her high rank, with such robes and ornaments as she might fancy. Grim Death calls out to me; else I would not have sworn to you to fulfil your wishes, whatever they might be. And it has ended thus, fatally for me and all atrociously unjust to Rama. Is it not enough? Blinded by ambition and envy, you seek to make me your instrument to banish Seeta too to the woods. But, know you the awful consequences that await such an act of fiendish cruelty? The aged bamboo brings forth fair blossoms, but expires the very moment; even so, my heinous sin would annihilate me.

Base plotter! Grant that Rama is your foe; grant that he has wronged you woefully; grant that he stands in the way of your son's securing the throne. But cast your cruel eye at Seeta, whose glances, soft and full, shame the frighted fawn that roams the forest. Has she anything to do with guile or deceit? She trembles at the very mention of harm or treachery to others; her heart knows no other deity but her lord and husband.

Dharma has for her no other meaning than that of devout and faithful service to him. Such a one could, on no occasion, have dreamt of doing you the slightest evil. Sin incarnate! Is it not enough, the one dark sin you have committed of driving Rama to the woods, to secure for you an eternity of woe and suffering in the deepest and darkest hell? What mean you further by heaping sin upon sin, crime upon crime, by tearing Laksmana and Seeta from their happy home and sending them after Rama to share his misery? I would give anything to know the dire fate that awaits you on the other side of death. It is no ordinary ingenuity or cleverness that could guess the kind of hell reserved for you. In the name of common justice, recall the promise I made you. Did you not send for Rama on the eve of his coronation and tell him in my presence, "Put away from you all thoughts of being consecrated as the heir-apparent to the throne and betake yourself for twice seven years to the forests, clad in the garb of hermits'; did I, the impotent listener to that shameful proposal, consent to the banishment of any other but Rama? What foul fiend put it into your head to demand that Seeta too should accompany her husband to the forest, clad as a homeless hermit! You overstep the bounds of my boon to you and invite untold eons of misery in hell". So raved he, the forlorn monarch, steeped in hopeless woe; the billows of grief, caused by being torn apart from the darling of his heart, closed over his head and he fainted right away.

He came to himself after a while and sat with drooping head and shame-faced look; when Rama, ready to start on his momentous journey, addressed him reverentially and said: "Mighty Emperor! Soul of

righteousness! Yon, Kausalya, my mother, is held in high estimate by all who know her; the winters of age have dowered her with all womanly virtues of head and heart; convinced beyond a doubt that the highest dharma lies in keeping a promise, she allows not the least sign of her measureless grief to betray itself; she bears you no grudge; she blames you not. The world knows you as the liberal bestower of gifts and boons to whomsoever may beg them of you; none was ever known to go back, but he was richer for having come to you. Hence, I too am emboldened to beg of you a boon; I pray that I might find favour in your eyes. My mother, bereft of her only son, is all powerless to stem the torrent of grief of separation, poor soul! This is her first and worst experience. High favour have you shown her and unique consideration, in that she is the queen of your heart and realm. Yet I would that you, in response to my prayers, accord her a kinder and more considerate treatment. I entreat you to watch over her that she sink not under the heavy burden of sorrow and misery, engendered of constant thought of myself, far away from her. She is as ignorant of the ways of the world and its wiles even as a babe unborn. Your Majesty is her only stay and support. May I hope that you will not leave her to the tender mercies of her rivals and enemies. Your love and respect are the only hold she has on life till she sees me again. Pardon me if, once again, I proffer my prayers to you. She can not bear to be away from me for an hour. Mighty Lord! More puissant than Mahendra! I trust you to see that she quits not, during my absence, that care-worn tenement of hers, wrapt in constant thought of her darling boy far away in the dreary woods. I trust you to avoid me the dire necessity of seeking for my mother in the dread

haunts of the Lord of Death, on my return here from my sojourn in the woods."

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE IDEAL WIFE.

SO spake Rama in pitiful and suppliant accents, as he stood before all in his humble hermit garb; his sire and the royal ladies were convulsed with woe and could scarcely keep their senses. Burning tears shut his eyes to the bright presence of Rama, while heavy grief choked his utterance. For a while he sat senseless and still, a prey to despair; then memory came back to him and with it his incoherant ravings about the child of his heart: "Alas! woe is me! A dreadful sinner I should have been in my past births and torn apart countless cows from their forlorn calves. Or, may be I tortured innocent and defenceless creatures with fiendish cruelty. Else this unparalleled misfortune would not have befallen me. The hour of my deliverance from this body strikes not a moment before its time; it should exhaust the karma for which it was intended. Ah! sweeter by far is death and more welcome than this cruel and pitiless torture, never-ceasing, at the hands of Kaikeyi. But, the life-breaths quit not the body the sooner for me or for any other helpless victim of misery. I live to see, with these aged eyes of mine, my darling son Rama, refulgent as smokeless flame, put away his robes of state and swathe his shapely limbs in the rude dress of bark that hermits affect; yet Death flees me. It is to me a wonderful mystery that a weak woman could be so dead-set upon securing her interests, and millions upon millions should,

in consequence, writhe in the pitiless grip of sorrow and misery." Blinded with tears, speechless with woe, he but cried out "Rama" and fainted away. All too soon he came back out of it and took up the burden of his woe. Said he to Sumantra, amidst a torrent of tears, "Bring me here in a moment the royal chariot yoked with noble coursers. Take away from this god-forsaken city and its hapless people Rama, the genius of its good fortune and glory, on his fateful journey to the southern forests. Of saintly life and holy ways as a maharshi, mighty and valiant, Rama is driven away from the kingdom that is his by right, all mercilessly, by the parents that brought him into the world; and it is but the most natural inference from it that the graces of head and heart do but engender such bitter grief and misery. It goes without saying that it is but honest endeavour thrown away to desire to possess excellent qualities and toil mightily to acquire them."

Meanwhile Sumantra had ready at the palace gates the royal chariot with fleet coursers to draw it and said, "Lord! everything is ready towards your journey to the woods." Then Dasaratha called in haste the officer in charge of his treasury and said, "Count well and carefully the years that fair Seeta has to spend in the forest and bring me here costly robes and priceless gems for her use the while." The official was extremely conversant with time and place; his name was a guarantee of utter purity of thought and deed. There was nothing he knew not about the royal treasury, the countless articles in it, rare and priceless and their excellences and defects. So, he obeyed his master's behests and placed before him the things ordered for. Unlike others of her sex, Seeta was not born of mortal parents; she was a model of symmetry,

loveliness and grace, even as the Books would have it: her surpassing beauty was enhanced a thousandfold when she decked herself with the robes and gems presented to her by her fond father-in-law, and she threw over the vast hall a glory that rivalled the rising sun in all his splendour.

Then, queen Kausalya cast loving arms round her, pressed lingering kisses on her head and said, "Child! you have set your foot on the path of the highest dharma. It is the nature of the ordinary run of women down here in this faithless world, to receive, all indifferently, even as if it was their due, the love, the respect and the riches that the husband bestows upon them with a lavish hand, in the height of his wealth and power; but when dark misfortune falls upon him and adversity, when he can no longer serve as the tool and instrument of their whims and fancies, they clean forget him and all he did for them. There is no saying how far they will go in the way of slighting and insulting him. Years of splendid luxury and happiness count for nothing against some trifling discomfort or disappointment; and it is quite natural for the bad lot to rail and fume at their husbands and avoid him like a plague. For the matter of that, young wives are prone to be light of speech, fickle, unfathomable of purpose, eager to taste of sinful and forbidden pleasures and flash with lightning rapidity from frenzied love to deathless hate. They are no models to follow, no ideals to reach. Fair lineage, knowledge profound, holy rites with the fire-god to witness, dresses and ornaments till they cry no more, favour conferred or peril warded off—not one of these nor all, can bind in silken bonds of love the light inconstant heart of such a one. Gold is their god and to him they are wedded for ever. Frail and fickle by nature,

it comes to them easy to work evil and woe upon their husbands and lay down their hearts, their lives, and their all at the feet of their faithless lovers. But to the good and the true, to those models of wifely devotion and love, the countless myriads of worlds hold nothing holy and good that vies with a beloved husband. Their feet never stray from the path of Right; they are ever faithful to the traditions of their race and line; good and great men have guided their feet on the path of Virtue; desire and hate are strangers to their heart. Now, Rama, my boy had, till now shone in the forefront of humanity and has been put away from the realm by the mysterious hand of Fate. *That* I hope is no reason for you to slight him. Prince or pauper, I would have you hold him as your lord, yea, as your god."

Seeta bent herself towards the queen over folded palms of reverence and to her who sought so earnestly and so kindly to teach her duty and virtue, she rendered meet reply. "Mother! It shall be my care to do as you enjoin, forgetting nought. I have been instructed right well in the duty, the love and the respect I should render my lord and husband. My parents have taken care of it even when I was a girl. I pray you include me not among the faithless multitude. The moon shall sooner lose its light and splendour than my heart cease to cleave to the traditions of good wives and faithful. The stringless veena gives forth no melody and the wheeless chariot serves not a man in his need. A hundred sons, a thousand, are but a curse and a burden to a wife, if she takes not her place by the side of her lord and husband. Father, mother and sons do give us happiness only in this mortal world. *That* is of no great account. But, no other than the husband can secure us happiness here and hereafter. What more natural for

a wife than to reverence him? My soul is firm bent on treading the path of good wives and faithful. Ideal women like my mother have explained to me in general and in detail that noble duty. So, I pray you not to pain my ears with any mention of a wife failing, in the least, in the reverence due to her husband, I could never dream of it even. A woman knows no other god but her husband." Kausalya was charmed to hear such loyalty and devotion from Seeta's lips. She was tossed amidst the conflicting emotions of unspeakable grief at the thought of her darling boy lost to her for fourteen years, immured in the dreary forests, and unspeakable joy at the thought of her unparalleled good fortune in being blessed with a daughter-in-law so virtuous and so loyal to her husband. Her words charmed the ear and were in consonance with dharma; they betrayed no mean intellect, no ordinary soul. Hence, the rival emotions united to engender a ceaseless torrent of tears from Kausalya.

Then Rama went round his saintly mother, laid his head at her feet and said, "Mother! grieve not; I look to you to safeguard the life and happiness of my father. The fourteen years of my stay in the woods will pass away as lightly as fourteen seconds; and you will remember it only as faintly as the light dreams of a healthy sleeper. I will fulfil the promise of his Majesty to Kaikeyi and her heart's inclinations also; and hope to lay my head at your feet again, in the company of my friends and well-wishers." He next turned to the three hundred and fifty wives of Dasaratha, whose heart was wrung with the grief that overwhelmed Kausalya and said, "Ladies! I do but follow the eternal dharma in craving your leave to depart to the forest. I am but a boy and with all his failings. I have

received from you, ever since I came into this world, the same love and care as is due to the child of your loins. Long familiarity and the ignorance of childhood and youth ought not to excuse in me dereliction of duty. I pray you pardon me if I have offended you in the least or failed in my respect or reverence to any one of you. My heart knows not peace till I receive the assurance of your forgiveness. Have I your leave to depart to the forest?" His lowly hermit garb and mean plight were too much for Dasaratha's wives to bear and they wailed long and loud, even as Krouncha birds wounded grievously. The halls that, till then, gave back the sweet and auspicious sounds of drum and tabor, veena and guitar, were now filled with groans, cries, wails, laments and other sounds of woe and ill-omened grief.

CHAPTER XL.

RAMA'S DEPARTURE.

THEN, Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta reverenced his Majesty king Dasaratha with folded hands, touched his feet with their heads and took leave of him. They next saluted queen Kausalya, dazed with grief. Lakshmana prostrated himself before his mother Sumitra and touched her feet with his head.

The noble lady could not restrain her tears; but she was ever intent on the peace and happiness of her son, and hence, she kissed him on the head and said, "Child! It comes to you so naturally to love your friends with no common love. Queen Kausalya brought forth a son to save the worlds; even so, I gave birth to you to serve Rama in every way, at all times,

in all places, in the city, in the forest. So, when you follow Rama in the woods as he roams through them in the happy company of Seeta, gazing at each strange and curious object, forget yourself not in the sweet contemplation of his supernal beauty, lordly gait, loving looks and honeyed words; never be thrown off your guard in the matter of looking after his safety. Prince or pauper, Rama is your lord, your god, your everything. It is the law of the world that the younger should ever obey the elder and serve him in every way. This is the dharma lived by the good and the great; this is the dharma lived from time immemorial by the scions of the Ikshwaku race. It is the duty of a Kshatriya to give away in unstinted charity, to engage himself in sacrifices to the gods and to cheerfully give his life at the call of his country. Hence, you will defend Rama from harm and evil, even at the cost of your life. Delay not a moment; start at once. Henceforth your father is Rama; Seeta is your mother; the pathless wilds are Ayodhya, the capital of your kingdom; your highest happiness consists in obeying the behests of Rama. Go in peace" Thus did Sumitra send forth her son to share the exile of Rama.

Then, as Matali, the charioteer of Indra, announces to his master that his conveyance is ready, even so Sumantra spoke to Rama over folded palms of respect, "Mighty prince of peerless fame! May all good be thine. The chariot waits for you to take you wherever you may list. This is the first day of the fourteen years you are to spend in the woods, in pursuance of the orders of Kaikeyi. You remember that she urged your departure from here this very day."

Seeta put on her dress and ornaments and got in to the chariot first, all cheerfully, shining like the sun

or the smokeless fire; Rama and Lakshmana ascended next. The attendants arranged in it the robes and ornaments given to Seeta by Dasaratha to last during the period of exile, as also the weapons, armour, leather-covered baskets, spades and axes. Then Sumantra urged the noble steeds fleeter than the wind.

As Rama left the city to live long years of privation in the woods, every one, men, women, children, elephants, horses and kine were struck senseless with grief. The people wandered about as if demented and afflicted with a nameless woe. Elephants in rut grew madder with grief. Horses ran here and there, as if some evil spirit possessed them. The harsh jangle of their ornaments pained the ear everywhere. As creatures parched with summer's heat run towards the cool waters, even so did men and women, old and young, in Ayodhya run after Rama. They hemmed in the chariot on all sides, before and behind, right and left and with streaming eyes and burning sighs, they raised their voices in a piteous wail, as if their very life was being torn out of their bodies. "Sumantra! pray rein the restive steeds. Oblige us by driving slow. Grant us to behold the face of our darling Rama even for a while. Who knows whether this may not be the last time we are se blessed? Is it made of adamant, the heart of her that bore Rama in her womb? Her godlike son is driven to the forest and yet it breaks not! There is no child more favoured of fortune than Seeta. As the light of the sun quits not for a moment the mount Meru, so she walks in the footsteps of the ideal wife, and follows him, even as his shadow. Lakshmana! Life holds for you nothing worth desiring, nothing worth achieving. You are the envy of the worlds and that for all time, since you are privileged to render every

service to your brother, radiant as a god and sweet spoken to all. Speech cannot measure the merit and happiness that lie in store for you through this. You but walk the straight path to the highest heavens, when you accompany Rama to his hermit home."

Then Dasaratha and his wives, loth to lose sight of Rama , rushed out from the harem crying, "Shall we not look once again upon the fair face of our darling Rama?" As when the leader of the herd, the bull-elephant, is captured by the cunning hunters, the cows trumpet forth their grief most piteously ; even so did the woman of the city cry and wail over the dire misfortune that befell them. Dasaratha heard it. The father of Rama, the monarch of countless millions, the proud scion of the race of Ikshwahu, rich in everything that the world could give, he saw himself sinking under the heavy curse that plunged himself and his people in the dark gulf of unspeakable woe ; and as when the Queen of night, in her full-orbed radiance, is dragged imperceptibly into the dark and hideous maw of Rahu, the serpent of the eclipse, even so, all brightness, all splendour, all lustre fled from his face. Ramachandra, of unfathomable fortitude, perceived his father running after him and cried "Faster. Sumantra !" What could poor Sumantra do ? Lend an ear to Rama who cried "Faster, yet faster" ? Or comply with the prayers and the entreaties of the townsmen who cried in despair "Stop, Stop" ? He stood confused, utterly unable to obey them both.

The dust clouds raised by the flying chariot wheels were laid by the tears that streamed from the eyes of the weeping multitudes. On every side rose groans, cries, wails, laments, sobs. Now you came upon groups of men and women who stood gazing straight before

them, lost to everything else; now you passed others who writhed in the grip of a speechless woe that was yet merciful enough to allow a passage for tears. As in a lotus pool the busy fish dart here and there and the pearly drops of the morning dew rain from the petals of the flowers shaken by them, even so the women of the city wept their eyes out, unable to bear the pangs of separation from Rama. As with one heart, with one brain, with one body, the millions of Ayodya bore their cross. Dasaratha, the professed guardian of their happiness here and hereafter, felt himself a despicable traitor to his duty by them and fell head long in a dead faint. The populace cried out in horror and pity at the sight; and they that followed Rama cried out in great fear. Some exclaimed "Ha! Rama." and others "Ha! Queen Kausalya." Not a single voice was silent, not a single eye was dry among those that came from the harem. Rama's ears were pierced with the screams and the pitiable cries, and he turned, only to see Dasaratha and Kausalya run after his chariot, staggering with unsteady gait like mad. He saw them following him, out of the corner of his eyes, even as the foal, bound tight beyond the possibility of escape, gazes pitiably at its dam. Accustomed all their lives to be conveyed in gorgeous chariots, they ran afoot; surrounded with every luxury and comfort, strangers to misery and privation, they shook with grief; and Rama, an impotent spectator, could but order Sumantra to drive the fleet horses yet faster. Of unshaken fortitude, yet he found it hard to bear, even as a lordly elephant pierced deep with the cruel goad. Kausalya neared the chariot, even as a cow rushes at the place where her calf lies helplessly bound. Again and again he saw Kausalya tottering after the chariot with streaming eyes, crying out "Ha, Rama! Ha, Lakshmana!

Ha, Seeta!" "Stop, stop the chariot" ordered Dasaratha; "Drive, drive faster" ordered Rama. Like a man caught between the wheels of a chariot, Sumantra struggled with his overwelming grief. Rama saw it and cried "Sumantra, listen to me. Drive on quicker. When you meet his Majesty again and he blames your disobedience for not listening to his orders to stop the chariot, tell him that his commands did not reach your ears. 'It is not true', you say; but I assure you I cannot keep my patience any longer. My promise made to my father will have to go for nought."

Sumantra bent his head in obedience to Rama, made him take leave of the people that followed him and urged the noble cousers to yet greater speed. Then, the citizens and the people of the harem realized the hopelessness of their pursuit, went round Rama and turned away from him. But, it was their bodies that went back; their hearts followed Rama and their tears poured forth never-ceasingly. Then, the councillors of the king, conversant with all usages, customs and traditions, respectfully submitted to Dasaratha that, the wise have laid down it is not good to accompany far on his way one, whose safe return we have at heart. Dasaratha reluctantly yielded to their advice and, with his wives and attendants, stood there for a long time, with wearied limbs and broken heart, gazing pitiably at Rama, who was fast disappearing in the distance. [Thirty centuries have passed since He began this memorable journey. Every step of it is known and is annually traversed by thousands; hero-worship is not extinct. What can Faith do! How strong are the ties of religion when entwined with the legends of a country!. How many a cart creeps creaking and weary along the road from Ayodhya to Chitrakuta! It is this that gives the

Ramayana a strange interest; the story still lives.' *Calcutta Review Vol. XXIII.*]

CHAPTER XLI.

THE CITIZENS' LAMENT.

AS Rama, the Lord of the universe, took respectful leave of his parents and left fair Ayodhya behind him, the womenfolk lifted their voices in pitiable wail and lament. "Alas! Raghunatha abandons us—he, who watched over us and ministered to our slightest wish till now, to us, the forlorn and the friendless! What shall we do! Whom shall we take refuge in! Who shall extend the shadow of his protection over us! His heart knows not anger, even when others cursed him all unjustly. He put away from him every thing that could provoke anger; nay, he calmed the most infuriate by his gentle smile and gentler words. Where goes he, the great One, whose heart knows no change in joy and sorrow? Where goes he, the great One, who makes no difference between us and Kausalya, the mother that bore him? Where goes he, the protector of the worlds, Rama, whom the king drives to the forests, unable to resist the pressure of Kaikeyi? How foolish and senseless is our king, who exiles to the woods Rama, the darling of all creatures, the true and the righteous." Thus did they lament, unable to contain their grief, like a cow torn from the side of its only calf. The sounds of woe fell on the ears of Dasaratha already staggering under the cruel blows of separation from his darling boy, and prostrated him quite.

That day, the holy Fires in Ayodhya were tended not. Rama was the soul of all beings; and all beings

animate and inanimate, suffered exquisite agony to see *him* in the grief of misfortune. The God of Fire withdrew his bright presence from his worshippers, who lay bereft of their senses. The householders cared not to go through their daily round of duties, the Aupasana and the Panchayagna. The citizens cared not to turn their hands and hearts to their daily avocations and wandered about as if possessed. The sun hid himself from sight. shorn of his glory. Elephants refused their feed. Cows would yield no milk to their calves. The fond mother, barren through long years, felt not the slightest joy at being blessed with a son on that woeful day. The moon trembled under the maleficient aspects of Mars, Jupiter, Mercury and Trisanku, the ancestor of the Raghus [Fours stars of the sixteenth lunar asterism.] The stars moved-rayless. The planets glowed with a dull light. Visakha, the ruling star of the Ikshwaku line was faintly visible in the sky as if through dense smoke. Huge clouds spread through the sky, driven on by fierce gales, like a storm tossed sea. The city quaked and trembled when Rama strode away from it, as if the shock was too much to bear. The quarters were hung with the pall of darkness, as if they hid their faces and sobbed in the abandonment of their grief. The sacred planets, Aswini and the other asterisms, the great constellation of the Sapta Rishis and the polestar Dhruva vanished from view. The citizens of Ayodhya, every one of them, were suddenly caught in the grip of an indescribable grief and despair. Not a soul, man or beast, had a thought of food or other concerns of life. Man and woman, young and old, were tossed on the roaring billows of endless woe and ever sighed hot and deep at being parted from Rama. The crowds that thronged the royal roads watered them with their tears.

Each face was sick and sad and was an utter stranger to peace or joy. A huge cloud of hopeless grief, dark and heavy, enwrapped the town in its deadly folds. The gentle breeze no more blew cool; the moon failed to bring joy to the hearts of the beholders; the resplendent sun gave forth no light; the whole world, animate and inanimate, was deluged with woe.

Every son in Ayodhya avoided the sight of his mother; "for" said he "Kausalya was bound to prevent Rama at any cost from proceeding to the forest. She failed to do so; it is a sure lesson to us that we should put no faith even in the mother that bore us." Every mother in Ayodhya steeled her heart against her son; "for" said she "Rama heeded not the tears and the prayers of his mother Kausalya, but obstinately carried out his purpose of betaking himself to the forest. What son would lend an ear to the words of his mother hereafter, when Rama, the ideal man, has chosen to set the rule?" The husband no longer turned towards his fond wife; "for" said he, "we do well to place not any faith in woman; we simply invite our fate thereby. Dasaratha, our king, centred all his thoughts, hopes and affection on Kaikeyi; her lightest word was a law unto him; yet she tortured him like a fiend and brought him to his death". The faithful wife plucked out from her heart her love and reverence for her lord and husband; "for" said she, "it is only sorry treatment we will get at the hands of those who swore before the sacred fire to love and cherish us; nothing retrains them, sin or virtue, heaven or hell. Who could sound the depths of Dasaratha's cruel and malignant heart who dared to humble himself before the imperious and wicked Kaikeyi's will and spurned aside Kausalya, his first love, his queen consort and the mother that bore in her womb Rama, the lord of the

universe, whom he condemned to dreary exile in the forests ?" Brothers kept apart from one another and their hearts grew black with hate at the thought of Bharata, whose hand snatched, all rudely, the crown from the brows of his elder brother Rama and immured him in the dark depths of the wild forests. No one had any faith or trust in kith or kin and said to themselves "Our friends, our kin, our home are centred in Rama. What have we to do with any one else in the world ?"

Rama requested permission to depart to the woods; and the emperor gave it: Kausalya gave her reluctant consent after all and sent her blessings along with her son. But, his friends were of a different stamp. He had no secrets from them; *they* had his confidence more than the parents that bore him. His friends would not allow the winds of heaven to visit Rama's face too roughly and considered themselves supremely honoured if they could lay down their lives in his cause. There was none who fainted away when the fatal wards "Rama is exiled to the woods" fell on his ears and came back to life and its sorrow-laden joys. Grief crushed them down, even as a huge mountain; and how could they throw it off ? So, they lay there in utter torpor. Else, would they not have prevented Rama, perforce if other means failed, from quitting the fair city of Ayodhya ?

As the earth quivers in affright, when Indra, the lord of the three worlds, extends over her his watchful care no more, so did Ayodhya tremble all over, out of fear and grief, when her lord and protector, Rama, turned his back upon her and through the mouths of her elephants, horses and troops cried aloud in the bitterness of her heart.

CHAPTER XLII.

DASARATHA'S LAMENT.

THE wretched monarch gazed after his banished son as long as the dust raised by the chariot wheels was seen afar. Curiously enough, the insensate dust-cloud grew and grew, as if it said to itself in deep pity, "Let me do what I can to enable the poor king to gaze after the darling of his heart, yet awhile." And when it vanished from view, Dasaratha heaved a deep sigh, as if his soul was rushing after Rama and fell, like a log, where he stood. Kausalya sprang forward and raised him by his right arm; Kaikeyi, whose hopes and fears were bound up in Bharata, stood at his left, but never put herself out to support the poor husband whom she had lured to his doom. In his relations with every one, high or low, Dasaratha was, by nature, the soul of politeness and respect; his heart was ever set upon dharma and he followed in the footsteps of the righteous and the just. Yet his unbounded hate towards Kaikeyi maddened him quite and he cursed her loud and deep. "Avaunt, foul fiend! Touch me not. Take your hateful presence away from my sight. You are nothing to me, no wife, no kin. I have no art nor part with those that depend upon you. I am no longer their master, nor they my servants. Here do I renounce, once for all, every comfort and benefit I might derive through you, though, I may have, in a most unfortunate hour of my life, taken you to wife before the God of Fire. If Bharata should ever sit in my place and his heart rejoice thereat, my deepest curse shall dog him ever and the funeral obsequies he performs for me shall not reach me."

Then Kausalya supported her lord and husband (was he not the father of her darling Rama ?), all covered with dust and dirt and slowly they dragged their weary feet to the forsaken palace. As one who foully slays a holy Brahmana for his money, as one who clasps to his breast a blazing fire, so did the righteous Dasaratha writhe in supreme agony, at the thought of Rama, the life and light of his sear, withered old age, now wending his way to the forest, clad in the garb of homeless hermits. Every now and then he stopped and turned his lack-lustre eyes on the traces of the envious chariot that bore his son away from his sight; and like the Lord of night looked he, in the fell grip of Rahu. He recollected that his son would, by then, have gone out of the city, and raised a cry: "Here do I see the traces of the car that bears my child away to the lonely wilds; but the great-souled One I see not. His fair body spread with richly-prepared sandal-paste, his proud limbs reclined on flower-soft cushions, he used to sink into the arms of welcome sleep, while sweet visions of beauty fanned him gently. And he, my darling, would fling his wearied limbs to-night heaven knows were, under a tree or a shrub, with a log of wood or a rough slab for a pillow! As a lordly elephant after his slumbers on the mountain side, my Rama would heave piteous sighs and arise from his dusty couch, all unmeet for him. The dwellers of the forest will behold the sad spectacle of the Lord of the earth, now wandering about the forest, homeless and destitute. Janaki, the beloved daughter of Janaka, would undergo nameless torture as she walks along the thorny forest path. Born to lead a life of perfect happiness and comfort, she is utterly unmeet to be named in the same breath with privation or misery. Never have her eyes been accustomed

to the rough forest sights and she would naturally tremble in affright at the howls and roars of the denizens thereof, that are enough to raise one's hairs off his head. Kaikeyi! Unparallelled sinner! I cannot live on even for a moment torn from my Rama's side. Slay me outright and reign long and happily over this realm, in widowed pomp, your hopes realized and your wishes gratified." So wailed the forlorn king. And as men who turn their sad steps homeward after they have consigned to the cruel flames one near and dear to them, Dasaratha and those with him entered the gloomy and ill-omened Ayodhoya.

From time immemorial, the citizens, old and young, used to throng the streets and the squares to catch a glimpse of their Emperor as he passed along. But now it was a veritable City of the Dead. Stores and stalls, halls and fanes were all closed. All had gone after Rama, every one who could drag his limbs along. There lay along the high roads only such as had fainted away from grief or felt themselves at the portals of death through being deprived of the sight of Rama. But for these, the city was utterly abandoned. Dasaratha, himself pierced to the heart with hopeless grief, was doomed to gaze on men and women, birds and beasts, sink under a crushing sorrow, their hearts away with Rama as he was rapidly nearing the dark forest; and so he passed through the portals of his palace, like the wintry sun engulfed in a bank of dark clouds. As some wide pool and deep, teeming with fierce serpents and shunned with terror by all, is invaded by Garuda, the mighty bird, who frees it of its deadly denizens and renders it a safe resort to one and all; even so, Ayodhya, the impregnable, which the foes never dreamt of approaching (was there not Rama to guard it?), was now free of access to any and every

one, now that Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta had turned their backs upon it.

Then Dasaratha, in faint and indistinct words, moaned; "Take me hence, as quickly as you can, to the palace of Kausalya, the fortunate mother that bore Rama in her womb. Grief and remorse would tear at my heart in any other place." His attendants respectfully guided him to the apartments of Kausalya and stood guard over them. The king flung himself on the flower-soft cushions, but could find no relief to his tortured limbs. A rayless gloom hung over the palace like a moonless sky, now that Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta were not there to brighten it with their presence. Dasaratha gazed about him; mighty of heart though he was, he flung his arms above his head and cried, "Ha, Rama! you had the heart to leave me here a prey to grief and misery. Thrice happy are they to whom it is given to clasp you in fond embrace when you come back from your grievous exile." Meanwhile, dark night came on apace, terrible even as the Night of Dissolution.

The billows of grief rose mountain-high and engulfed the poor old king, who turned a despairing eye to Kausalya that was nigh and said, "My dear! The light has departed from my eyes and I see not where you stand. Pray touch me well with your hands. My eyes have gone after Rama and have not yet returned. They have been wont to gaze in rapturous bliss, never satisfied, upon my darling child begot after sixty-thousand years of fasts and vows; his beauty has ensnared them. They have gone after him, never to return. Though denied the privilege of beholding him now, it was yet possible for them to look upon you, his fortunate mother. But alas! they have deprived me even of this joy. I should, of a truth, look upon the fair face of

Rama to wash myself of the dark sin of having looked at Kaikeyi. But, since it is now denied to me beyond hope, I trusted to see your face at least. Ah! miserable wretch that I am! even that cup of hope is dashed from my lips. The presence of our senses is attested by their contacting objects of perception. Surely, I have lost the power of sight, now that I cannot see you. And I wish to make sure whether my sense of touch is not lost to me likewise. Kindly feel me with your hands and I will judge whether I possess that faculty or no. Further, my parched frame would find, I am sure, instant relief if soothed by your hands that fondled and nourished Rama, whose absence is the cause of all my woe. Rama I may not see; but equal joy will be mine if I see you, if I touch you if I talk to you, whom Rama calls his mother. Let no dark suspicion cloud your heart and whisper 'He held secret counsel with Kaikeyi once before and it ended in exiling my son Rama to the dreary woods. To-day he pretends, all on a sudden, to love me as he never did before; I fear some greater evil is on its way to me'. Pray extend your forgiveness to me as one deluded by folly and cupidity, and touch me with your hands."

Kausalya then approached the stricken king, took her seat by him and wailed grievously, her burning sights punctuating, as it were, her piteous accents.

CHAPTER XLIII.

KAUSALYA'S LAMENT.

"AS the black cobra, just rid of its slough, relieves itself of its cruel venom by planting its fangs in the doomed body of some on and seeks whom

it may next attack, even so, Kaikeyi, the cruel serpent in human form, bit Rama with her venomed fangs of deceit, drove him to the woods and roams abroad, seeking whom next she might ruin. A serpent gets into a house and strikes terror into the hearts of those within and without; even so, Kaikeyi has done with Rama and would even practise her fiendish cruelties upon me.

"Noble king! If it is the desire of your heart that Bharata should sit on the throne of the Ikshwakus and not Rama, please yourself by all means. But, how does it necessitate your exiling Rama to the forests? Are you afraid that he may plot some evil against Bharata? Rama shall be the slave, the humble bondsman of the young king. Would it be a heavy burden to Bharata to feed him? Well, I will spare him even that trouble. My Rama shall live upon the generosity of the charitable souls of Ayodhya. Anyhow I want him to be with me. The Agnihotrins offer, on the new and the full moon days, cakes of rice to the Gods and the Fathers, but set apart the husks, saying, 'I give this to the Raksasas; to them it belongs and not to me'; even so you have, all deceitfully, driven away Rama from the kingdom that is his by every right and have cast him aside as the portion of the Rakshasas. My hero of a boy is, even now, taking his way, with Lakshmana and Seeta at his back, to the gloomy forests, with the lordly gait of a noble elephant.

"My lord! How had you the heart to doom to a horrible forest life the childern who were utter strangers to misery and want, pain and trouble and *that* at the bidding of the black-hearted Kaikeyi? Did you bestow a thought on their inevitable fate or on the countless dangers and difficulties that would beset their path? Rama and Seeta are in the flower of their youth. It

behoves them to pass the spring time of their life all joyfully, with wealth, luxury, pomp, splendour, dresses, ornaments, seats, conveyances, attendants and what else the heart may desire. Now, behold the work of your hands. You have hunted them out of your kingdom into the frightful forests where man is not. Deprived of every accustomed article of luxury, they feed, perforce, upon roots and fruits, like the wild animals or the wilder men that roam the woods. Clad in the rough skins of beasts, all uncouth, with their fair hair wound in matted coils about their head, they fling their weary limbs on the rough ground at the foot of some merciful tree or rock, their hearts ever trembling at what may befall them at the hands of the cruel beasts or the crueller Rakshasas. High merit and holy did you lay up thereby!! Would that this day beheld the ceasing of my sorrow and the return of Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta! Ah! Would I ever beheld Rama and Lakshmana pass back through the portals of this world-renowned Ayodhya, as a strong man refreshed after his dreamless slumbers? Would I ever behold the citizens, raising aloft, with happy shouts, flags and banners, arches and columns and celebrate the joyful occasion with loud acclamations and deep, even as the Lord of the waters when the moon calls out to him? When would my boy, the prince of heroes, enter this city on his lordly chariot, with Seeta before him, like a shapely cow before her bull? When would I see his million subjects stand along the high road and scatter fried grain and flowers along his path? Would I ever see Rama and Lakshmana come back into Ayodhya, graced with beautiful ear-rings and shining from afar like lofty peaks, with their weapons before them in the chariot? When would I see the Brahmana maidens go round the city in

auspicious circuit, giving flowers and fruits to all they meet? When would my darling Rama, old in wisdom, but of sweet twenty-five, like unto the gods, come back to me and chase away grief and sorrow from my heart, even as the merciful heavens that pour down their welcome showers thrice a month? Is it that I was guilty in my past births of the terrible sin of cruelly cutting off the udders of cows when their calves were eagerly springing forth to draw their sustenance? Else, how could I reconcile this awful visitation with the fact that I am the fortunate mother of such a hero? I suffer indescribable tortures, deprived of my only son by the cruel hands of Kaikeyi, even as a cow whose only calf is slain before her eyes by the cruel beast of prey. How can I bear to live away from my Rama, master of all arts and sciences, and endowed with every envied excellence of heart and head? Fate wills not that I live on earth, too ill-starred to behold my princely hero. The grief of separation from my heart's joy consumes me, even as the summer sun burns up the hapless earth with his thousand rays."

CHAPTER XLIV.

SUMITRA CONSOLES KAUSALYA.

AND to her, the mother of Rama, who thus bewailed her lot, spake Sumitra ever centred in the observance of the highest dharma. "Noble lady! I wonder how you can bring yourself to weep thus, seeing that you have been so blessed by the gods as to be the mother of Rama, the Ideal Man, on whom every excellence of body, mind and heart, wait with humble devotion. It is all unmeet that you give way to your grief

thus violently. Is it not supremely absurd to think that danger or difficulty would ever cross the path of that Supreme One at any time or at any place ? Of inconceivable might is your son ; yet, he has chosen to put away from him the crown that is his by every right, to go to the woods, a voluntary exile. Know you why ? Is it not that he might fulfil the dharma of obeying the behests of his sire, famed for his righteousness and truth ? Is it not the highest dharma ever practised by the good and the great ? Is it not a sure guide to boundless bliss in the worlds on high ? Then why grieve over him ? My son, the soul of purity and utter compassion to all beings, my son Lakshmana practises, with an unfaltering resolve, the noble dharma of rendering joyful service to Rama and of evincing filial devotion to him. Inconceivably great is the good that will accrue to him by it. And Janaki, born to lead a life of happiness, comfort and luxury, has chosen to follow your righteous son to the woods, knowing full well, by herself and from Rama, the dangers and hardships of a forest life. Your son will raise aloft the banner of Fame in the eyes of the present and future. Righteousness, truth and constancy form his wealth. And to such a one what happiness is too high, what position too lofty ?

"Rama's greatness, nobility, might and utter purity of thought, word and deed are known best to the Lord of the sun ; and he dare not so much as touch Rama with his rays too roughly. Out of the merit laid up by me in my past births, I see, with the open eye of wisdom, that he who is known as Sree Rama, your son among men, is no other than the Supreme Soul. I rendered humble service to Him in my past births and was rewarded with unclouded vision. 'The sun rises with fear of Him in his heart' say the Holy

Books; and he is ever on the look out to render Him every humble service possible. Is it not supremely absurd to think that the Lord of the day, who goes about his work with fear and trembling in his heart, would cause the slightest pain or discomfort to his Lord and Master. Knows he not and the other Shining Ones with him, the glory and greatness of Rama, whom the vedas laud as 'Beyond all sin, Beyond all imperfection, Lord of all, the Inner Ruler of all, the Supreme Person?' The lord Vayu would ever seek to fan him gently, laden with the delicious and manifold scents and perfumes of the virgin forests; for, says not the Sruti 'Vayu blows with fear of the Lord in his heart'? The Moon will seek to gladden your boy with her cool says while he takes his rest under the forest trees, as fondly and lovingly as the fondest father. Brahma has, out of a gratified heart, instructed Rama in many a divine weapon, when he went out to the forests of Dandaka, to besiege Vaijayanta, the capital of Asura Sambara and slew him in battle dire. That hero, protected by the might of his arm will, I am sure, range the woods as fearlessly happy as if he was in his palace at Ayodhya.

"You need not fear that Bharata will impregnably strengthen himself in power before the return of Rama, who will again lose, in consequence, his kingdom; for, whoever heard of any one stand up to Rama in battle and live to tell it? And such a one, you say, will find it a hard task to get back his kingdom. It is but the work of a moment for him to come into his own, at the expiry of his term of exile; for, his all-compelling supernal beauty, his heroic valour before which his enemies bite the dust and his inconceivable might would, of themselves, do it for him. Rama is the supreme soul of all. As such, the sun, the giver of light and

life to the world, derives *his* life and light from him. He could consume to nothing the all-consuming God of fire. He is the sovereign lord of Brahma, whose sway extends over the myriad worlds. Lakshmi, the giver of peace and prosperity to all, derives *her* power and might from him. Mother Earth, the support of all, yet rests upon him. Fame, whom all seek, yet seeks *him* in humble reverence. The high gods who receive the worship and adoration of all, yet offer worship and addoration to *him*. He is the First and Best of all beings. To Rama, thus enowered with every conceivable virtue and excellence, I see not any danger or discomfort, in Ayodhya or in the gloomy forests. That ideal man will, at no distant time, be crowned at Ayodhya, with his queens—Bhudevi (the earth), Seeta, and Vijayalakshmi (Victory). Seeta, who is but Lakshmi in mortal guise, has gone with Rama; and think you that the Goddess of victory and power would seek any other? When the god-like prince, whose glory blinds his enemies on the battle-field, went away from this town, clad in the lowly garb of heımits, the citizens, one and all, wept their eyes blind and fainted away. But what lacks he, with Seeta by his side, the bright Deity of power and prosperity? What lacks he when there goes before him Lakshmana in warlike guise, my heroic boy, the prince of warriors?

"Of a truth, you will live to see him return from his exile. Grieve not for him. Cloud not your soul in dark ignorance where he is concerned. I speak but the veriest truth. You will live to see, at no distant date, your son dawning upon you, like the refulgent moon in the cloudless sky, and lay his head again at your feet in reverence. You will live to see the tears of joy stream down your cheeks when he is crowned in all pomp

and glory, enhanced thousandfold by his victorious sojourn in the forests. Saw you any trace, nay, the slightest, of grief or sorrow or depression in him when he went away from us? No. So, Rama, with Lakshmana and Seeta by his side, will come back to you safe and happy. Weep not; let grief find no place in your heart. We all look to *you* for comport and consolation; and if you abandan yourself thus to uucontrolled grief, what would become of us? It is an inexplicable wonder to me that you should ever give way to sorrow when Rama calls you his mother. The boundless universe holds not another higher and nobler than Rama, whose feet ever walk in the path of the great and the good. I assure you, time and oft, that your sorrow-laden eyes will stream with tears of joy, even as the dark clouds pour down the welcome showers in winter, when Rama, Seeta and Lakshmana come back from their self-imposed exile and lay their heads at your feet. I will live to see the happy day when your glorious son, to whom all the world looks to fulfil the dearest wishes of their hearts, comes back from the woods and with his strong and flower-soft hands clasp your feet in loving reverence. You will deluge his fair head with tears of joy, like the surcharged clouds on mountain peaks, when he and his friends humble themselves at your feet."

Sumitra was an adept in bringing comfort and solace to the hearts of others with apt and well-chosen words. Free from all taint or imperfection, she sought to chase away the dark grief that clouded the heart of Kausalya. Yet, she was a queen of Dasaratha even as Kausalya. She had sent forth her son Lakshmana to the forests, all unsolicited, even as Kausalya. Like her, she basked not in the favour and countenance of Dasaratha, their lord and husband. But, there the comparison

ends. Kausalya wept and wailed and did her very best to prevent Rama when he begged leave of her to go to the forest; while Sumitra grieved not when her son Lakshmana sought her presence to crave permission to accompany Rama; on the other hand, she gave him many a good counsel, consistent with duty and virtue, laid her commands on him to walk with all his might on the difficult and narrow path of Service to the Lord, that led to the goal of supreme Good and sent him forth with a glad heart. Kausalya was ever in mortal dread of the cruelty and hatred of Kaikeyi; Sumitra was an utter stranger to such apprehensions. Kausalya ate her heart out at being excluded from the love of Dasaratha whom Kaikeyi's fresh charms held in thrall; such thoughts never found their way into the heart of Sumitra, whose perfect wisdom viewed alike joy and sorrow, friend and foe, praise and blame. Kausalya was the thrice-blessed mother of Rama, the Supreme Self, and yet was denied any insight into his real nature and greatness; Sumitra, with unclouded vision, knew Rama for what he was aud rendered humble and joyful service to him. Hence Sumitra's words gradually sank into the heart of Kausalya and chased away the grief that consumed her body and darkened her soul, even as the pale clouds in autumn which the light gale dissolves to nothing.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE CITIZENS FOLLOW RAMA.

THE people of the harem, the ministers and Dasaratha himself returned to Ayodhya; but the citizens followed the chariot of Rama as it sped its way

towards the forests, out of their over-mastering love for him. They knew no danger, no difficulty where went Rama, the flower of valour. They knew no bounds to their joy when they beheld his glorious form—their prince of unparalleled fame and excellence, even as the world cannot contain its joy and delight at beholding the Queen of night in her full-orbed radiance. Time and oft they cried in entreaty "Rama! turn back"; but his face was ever set towards the dark woods that his father's word might be kept. Supreme duty called out to him and he was all powerless to return to Ayodhya as they would have him do. Their utterly unselfish love towards him evoked boundless compassion in his heart and affection; they were his children, as it were, and he turned again and again to fondly gaze at them. He would give them the very best advice under the circumstances and said, "I pray you to extend to Bharata the same kindness and respect that you have for me. Rest assured that nothing would give me greater pleasure. Say not 'Bharata, the son of Kaikeyi! Sole heir to her unparalleled wickedness! Is that your reply to our prayers and entreaties, that you deliver us over, helplessly bound, into his cruel hands?' For, Bharata is a model of virtue; utterly pure and flawless is his life; he will, of a truth, secure to you every means to unbounded happineess here and hereafter. Young in years, he is grey in wisdom; soft-spoken and gentle, yet he is a hero of irresistible valour. He will stand between you and danger or sorrow or grief. Every royal excellence vies with one another to adorn him. That is why the king has chosen him to be his heir-apparent. Lakshmana, Satrughna and myself regard our sire's slightest word as law. I look to you to so conduct yourselves that he grieves not for me while I am away in

the forests. That is the shortest and the surest way to my heart."

As Rama went on expressing his firm resolve to carry out his father's commands at any risk, the desire grew and grew in the hearts of the citizens that none should rule over them but he; and again and again they prayed "Rama! Know we not that Dasaratha deputed you and you alone, his eldest son, to rule over this kingdom and protect us? Is it not your plain duty to abide by that arrangement? *That* is your father's promise to the world and you keep it right well in acceding to our prayer." As the hunter ensnares the beasts of the forest and drags them after him wherever he goes, Rama and Lakshmana enmeshed the citizens of Ayodhya with their noble excellences and compelled them to follow wherever they went, weeping piteously.

They were of three classes. Elders in years, elders in wisdom and elders in spiritual might. The first were unable to keep up with the fleet coursers and lagged behind, their hoary heads shaking with age and infirmity. "Noble steeds that bear away from us, cruelly fast, our young prince, the light of our eyes! Turn back. Speed not toward the forest. We speak but in the interests of your master and ours." They stayed not, whereat the elders cried out, "Verily, the sense of hearing is common to all creatures; and your ears are larger and more capacious. Our prayers cannot have failed to reach them and it behoves you not to proceed thereafter. Your lord is the soul of purity, the beau-ideal of valour and faithful to his word. If you seek to walk in the path of right and duty, you should turn back and bear him to Ayodhya, not to the forest." The piteous accents of grief stirred the heart of Rama to its very depths. "It is atrocious for us to remain in the chariot

even after our ears have been pained with such words" said he and got down in all haste and with him, Lakshmana and Seeta. It was against the dictates of his generous heart to go further without offering solace and comfort to the Brahmanas; so, he walked on slowly till they came up. A little while ago he took leave, with folded palms, of the people of the harem, the ministers and his father, and persuaded them to stop; but, he did not come down from the chariot. It was quite another affair to stop the Brahmanas from following him. Boundless devotion to him filled his heart, for, they knew, clearer than others, his divine nature and mission. He could not bear to look upon their grief and tears; it would be the greatest insult to stop them, seated as he was in the chariot; so, his natural affection for them and compassion induced him to get down. But for all that, his face was turned away from Ayodhya, and he walked on towards the forest.

At once the Brahmanas concluded that Rama had turned a merciful ear to their prayers and was returning to Ayodhya and their joy knew no bounds. But, when they saw that he descended from his chariot only to walk towards the forest, their hearts quaked with fear. "Our grief and tears are powerless to stop him. Let us hamper him with our resolve to go with him to the wilds, and of a surety, he cannot proceed further." So they cried out "The holy mantras, the sacred rites, perfect wisdom, Yoga and all other observances characteristic of the Brahmanas, do follow you in the guise of this weeping crowd, you who, though a kshatriya, still deserves ths reverence and worship of the highest Brahmanas. The sacred Fires, to whom we make reverential offerings, lie enshrined in these fire-sticks and follow you on our shoulders. Behold the countless

umbrellas, white as driven-snow, that we have won by our Vajapeya rites! They troop after you like the pale autumn clouds. The burning sun scorches your delicate limbs and our umbrellas will give you a cool and refreshing shade. Our intellects had, till now, been engaged in the study of the vedic mantras and in the unravelling of their heart-doctrine; but nothing else occupies them at present but your grievous exile to the forest. The Vedas, the Sastras, meditation or study attract them not. May be you think we, should not neglect the study of the Vedas that constitute our noblest wealth, nor abandon our wives and children that look to us for everything. The Vedas are ever enshrined in our heart of hearts and would lose nothing by being laid aside for a time. Our wives are best guarded by the utter purity of their hearts and faithful devotion to us. It would do you no good to exile yourself to the forest. You will do better to return with us. Is it not your dearest wish to obey the behests of your royal sire? But how can we proceed about our duties if you are not with us? It is all unjust of you to seek to practise *your* dharma when you deliberately set about to ruin ours. We are Brahmanas; we are old in years, wisdom and spiritual fervour; yet, we cannot tear ourselves away from your side.

"What! you turn a deaf year to our prayers and proceed all obstinately! You pride yourself on your steadfast adherence to the practice of dharma. Behold! we lay our hoary heads, white as swan-down in the dust and throw ourselves at your feet to pray you to return to Ayodhya. Many among us have begun yagas and yagnas relying upon your presence and help; how could they perform them if you go away from us? On you will fall the sin of having destroyed them.

"Never mind our prayers. Beasts and other inanimate objects too entreat you to come back. Can you not find it in your heart to grant their prayers, seeing that they love and reverence you so immensely. Behold these trees! 'The citizens of Ayodhya' they said to themselves 'are supremely blessed in that they could go with Rama. Why should we be denied that honor and privilege?' and tried to come with us. But, being firmly rooted to the earth, they were unable to move. The wind that blows through their leaves is their piteous wail—'Alas! we are powerless to go with our Rama even as the citizens of Ayodhya.' Rama! Are you not the Inner Ruler of all? Are you not the soul of mercy and compassion to all beings? When you are under the shadow of pain or affliction, is it a wonder that the whole universe, your body, should feel it too? Glance at the birds on yon tree. The food drops from their listless mouths; they fly not abroad; they do not care to hop down to the earth; there they sit torpid, as if their great grief had drained them of life and motion, sense and feeling."

The Brahmanas walked on after Rama, moaning and praying, wailing and entreating, when the river Tamasa rose in their path as if to say "Rama! Slight not the request of the Brahmanas. Go back to Ayodhya." Then Sumantra unyoked the tired horses, allowed them to have a roll on the ground and gave them a nice bath and drink in the cool river; he then fed them carefully and gently walked them for a while along the banks of the Tamasa.

CHAPTER XLVI.

RAMA ABANDONS THE CITIZENS.

THEY were sitting on the lovely banks of the Tamasa when Rama turned to Lakshmana and said, "This is the first night of our exile in the forest. Do not vex yourself with the thought 'How could Seeta, so delicately brought up, walk all the way to the distant forests?' Behold these woods dull and colourless, as if there faces were clouded with a great sorrow. The birds, and beasts, seek their nightly homes and howl and scream, chirp and twitter, as if it were the voice of the woods raised in grievous lament. Of a truth, the citizens of Ayodhya, men and women, would, poor souls! eat their hearts out of grief at being parted from us. Their love towards our monarch is something indescribable, as they find in him their ideal of every manly virtue and excellence; none the less have we a share of their love—we the royal princes. Our parents will weep themselves blind to think of us far away from them. My heart grieves at the bare thought of it. But Bharata is the soul of virtue; and he will soothe the grief of our elders with apt and well-chosen expressions of comfort; that is what gives me some relief. I know that he is the very opposite of the cruel Kaikeyi; I have every confidence in his unbounded compassion and sympathy for the weak and the suffering and I see no reason to grieve about our parents, over much seeing that they are in safe hands.

"When Seeta decided to come with me, I grieved to think that there was no one to keep her company. Then you offered to come with us and have relieved me of that anxiety. This is the first day of our exile;

besides, we stand on holy ground; so, it is good that we fast to night, taking, if necessary, a little water. We can procure here plenty of sweet fruits and succulent roots; but we can do without them." He turned to Sumantra and said "Look to the horses carefully."

The old charioteer tethered the noble steeds, fed them with sweet grass, and seeing that the sun was passing through the portals of the West, offered his evening prayers to the Goddess of twilight. He next prepared a bed for Rama and Seeta, of soft leaves and grass on the banks of the Tamasa, while Lakshmana rendered joyful assistance. Then Rama and Seeta reposed upon them, while Lakshmana and Sumantra stood guard over them the whole night, the aged minister listening with reverence to the other as he dilated upon his favourite theme, the divine excellences of Kausalya's darling.

Rama and with him the citizens of Ayodhya, lay in tired sleep that night on the banks of the Tamasa thickly studded with cattle ranches and cow-pens. Rama awoke in the small hours of the morning and beheld the citizens plunged in profound sleep. "Lakshmana!" said he in low and gentle accents, "behold these, our good friends of Ayodhya, entirely oblivious of their hearths and homes, wives and children, out of their great love for us; it grieves my heart to see them lie on the bare ground and under the trees. They will take us with them back to Ayodhya and would gladly give their lives for it; it is hopeless to shake them off. So, we will ride far and fast ere these awake. I cannot bear to see, once again, these, my subjects, dearer to me than my own self, lie on the earth and under the trees in wild confusion. It is a ruler's bounden duty to stand between his subjects and sorrow; behold the ideal king

in me who would cause them unutterable misery!" To which Lakshmana replied "Your proposal sounds just and reasonable. Pray get into the chariot without delay." Then Rama ordered Sumantra to have the chariot ready that they might quit the place at once. So they crossed the eddying Tamasa, silently got down from the chariot and walked on for a while, until they came upon a track where even the timid creatures of the forest can roam fearlessly. Rama resolved to throw the citizens off the scent and said "Sumantra! just drive the chariot towards the north a little way, that the simple people might take it that I have gone back to Ayodhya; and manage to return so cunningly as to deceive them; it would go against my promise to the king to come with you." It was done; they got into the chariot, faced it to the north for a while to ensure an auspicious journey and then drove very very fast towards the forests.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE BEREAVED CITIZENS.

DAY broke as the citizens roused themselves from their heavy sleep and looked about with one accord to where Rama was or ought to have been; but they found him not and stood dazed with grief and disappointment. With streaming eyes they ran hither and thither, but could not catch a glimpse even of the dust raised by his chariot wheels. At last they despaired of following him and cried, "Where did this devilish sleep lie in wait for us? We have been nicely fooled and deprived of the glorious privilege of beholding that great One with long arms and mighty shoulders.

How had our Rama the heart to do it? He has elected to cast us off and speed to the frightful forests, knowing, as he does, our boundless love and devotion to him. What have we to do with life and its hollow joys when we have lost him? Let us starve ourselves to death on this accursed spot; or walk towards the north, on and on until we fall dead; or build a huge fire with the wood and the leaves here and leap into it, one and all, joyfully. For, what reply have we to give to those who will anxiously await our arrival? 'We led to the place of his exile Rama the soul of water who knows not envy but as a sweet word for enemy one'; would this be a meet reply? If we dared to go back to Ayodhya without Rama, the women, the children and the aged will die of a broken heart. We left the capital in the company of the god-like Rama of restrained self; and with what face shall we enter it without him?" And they lifted their hands and voices and cried piteously like a cow bereft of her calf. They followed his track for a while until it was lost on a grass plot; the sight redoubled their grief and they turned back saying "What will become of us? The very gods are banded against us." And thus they dragged their steps back to sorrowing Ayodhya, with wan faces and heavy hearts.

Their tears flowed afresh at the sight of the desolate houses with none to keep them neat and bright. The forsaken city seemed to their eyes like a mighty river from whose deep pools Garuda had carried off the terrible serpents; or like the broad firmament without the bright moon to illuminate it; or like the shoreless ocean dried up by a mighty cataclysm. They reached their homes, filled with every comfort and luxury and stood there, gazing at vacancy, as though demented. They could not make out their kin or friends or their neighbours.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE WOMEN OF AYODHYA.

THEY that went with Rama and returned without him called upon death, who came to them not and wept as if in the grip of some unspeakable grief or strange disease. Their five pranas (vital currents) were eager to quit their bodies. Every one of them went to his house, stared at his wife and children and cried stupidly "We could not persuade Rama to come back with us; nor could we go with him". They met their dearest friends and knew no delight in their company; rare objects and wonderful stirred not their curiosity or desire. The thrifty merchant ever intent on making money, even he forgot to attend his place of business. Their wives and children, who came to them in this life as the result of hard-won merit in former ones, pleased them not. There was no one who evinced the slightest joy, tho' he got back a priceless article lost long ago, or though he came upon an inexhaustible treasure. Even the woman that was blessed with a bright boy after years of barrenness, evinced not the slightest joy or gladness thereat.

The women in every house beheld their husbands return without Rama; they wept aloud in utter grief and struck deep into their hearts with cruel words, as mahouts dig their sharp goads into the heads of refractory elephants. "To such god-forsaken sinners as you are, house and home, wife and child, corn and wealth, comfort and luxury are a mockery, a disgrace. The Lord has deigned to come down in mortal guise to uplift, out of his boundless mercy, all beings from the ocean of endless births and deaths; he has elected

to manifest himself even in the very country, the very town we are in; not for a day or two, but for long years has he chosen to live with us; yet, there are those who call themselves men, who could not, or would not lift their hearts in worship and devotion to the Lord of all and offer Him sweet service and utter obedience. These incarnations of sin would prefer to pass their wretched lives in the sweet company of their wives and children. Verily, they are wedded thro' all eternity to the mighty wheel of births and deaths. Who stands in the eyes of the whole world as the ideal servant of the Lord, the typical good man and great? Behold! it is Lakshmana and no other, who has elected to follow Rama and has been privileged to render him every service at all times and in all places; and Seeta is the most fortunate and the most honor'd of womenkind.

"Enough of that. Their good fortune is beyond all praise; but behold the wonderful merit laid up by the inanimate rivers and trees. Verily incalculable should be the merit achieved by the rivers, the lakes and the lotus-pools where Rama deigns to bathe. Interminable forests adorned with lovely groves, lofty mountains with their loftier peaks, broad rivers and limpid lakes will enhance his beauty as he chances to pass by them. Forest or mountain, it will not miss the golden opportunity of offering Rama every humble respect and reverence, for, he is the most favor'd guest they could ever hope to entertain. The trees would recognize Rama as the Supreme Self; the sweet hum of the bees as they flit about the fragrant flowers, is the holy mantras chanted in his praise; the boughs are their hands and with them they would offer bright flowers to him in supreme adoration. The huge mountains have but

to catch a glimpse of Rama to overwhelm him with their attentions; in season or out of it, they would not rest until they had shown him their wonderful cataracts and waterfalls, their starry flowers and delicious fruits and their nectarine waters. The trees would spread at their feet soft beds of delicate flowers and shoots, send sweet zephyrs to invite him to the spot and relieve their noble guests of the fatigues of their journey.

"Fear or danger, want or defeat are things unknown where Rama chooses to dwell. The flower of valour and heroism, you have but to say that he is the son of Dasaratha and you have said all. So, we shall even overtake him before he travels too far from us. To serve at his feet is the surest and the shortest way to supreme bliss. He is our lord; he is our refuge; he is our stay and support and we have none else to whom our hearts can turn at any moment of joy or sorrow. Ours be the happy lot to render all humble service to Seeta, the sweet Mother of Mercy, while you monopolise the service of the Lord Rama. Rama would fulfil the dearest wishes of your heart and keep away danger and sorrow from you, be he the king of Ayodhya or the exile of Dandaka. And Seeta will look after us with no less care and solicitude.

"This city is no place for good and holy men. Our ears will be eternally pained by the wails and lamentations of those whom Rama has left behind. It would not be long before we go mad under the torture. None of us will elect to dwell in this god-forsaken Valley of Tears. This realm is fated to be the hot-bed of unrighteousness, since Kaikeyi has been pleased to take it under her sway. We can barely hope to keep body and soul together in such a place. Why speak of wives and children, corn and cattle, as long as that Kaikeyi

is alive—the fiend in human shape that abandoned to a cruel fate husband and son for power and riches? It would be but placing our heads in the mouth of the lion to live in her domains; all the gold of the world, above and below, could not tempt us to such an act of folly. Yea, we swear it on the dear heads of our children. Who can ever hope for life and happiness, peace and plenty and look to Kaikeyi for them, the cruel-hearted devil who could drive our Rama to the dark forests, our prince, our hero, our darling? Who can ever hope to reach the Mansions of the Blessed and soil himself with wealth polluted by her? This realm, from end to end, will, in no time, turn masterless and totter on the verge of destruction.

"The king would not survive Rama's exile to the woods; and that means ruin and destruction all round. You have exhausted the results of your meritorious acts and have come into the enjoyment of the fruits of your unrighteousness. One can see it with half an eye that you are the most wretched and unfortunate of men. Any one can predict as much when you have let slip through your fingers that priceless treasure Rama. So, repair in all haste to where Rama is; or drink of the deadliest poison and take yourselves away from the ranks of humanity whom you pollute; or hide your miserable heads in shame where no one, man or beast, can find you out.

"But you may say 'Rama went to the woods to fulfil his father's word and gladden the heart of Kaikeyi, his mother. We see nothing wrong in that'. See you not that she has basely deceived the old king and has brought about Rama's exile to the forest? Dasaratha has *nobly* crowned the sixty-thousand years of his benign rule by leaving us to the tender mercies of Bharata,

even as one consigns a favourite cow to the charge of a butcher. Ah! It is the dwellers of the forests that are blessed, in that they could gaze their fill on Rama and his sweet face radiant as the full orbed moon, on his dark lustre, like unto the surcharged clouds in winter, on his mighty shoulders, on his strong arms that descend below his knees, on his eyes sweet and soft as the petals of the opening lotus and on his lordly gait, majestic and proud as that of an elephant. He is ever sweet-spoken; but his words are ever wedded to truth and justice. He is ever the first to speak to others and put them at their ease. He has ever a smile and a kind word of welcome for every one. Like the bright moon, he is ever a source of delight to those that behold him. Is it given to us to behold his face once again, the unparallelled hero."

Those good women of the town wailed and wept aloud, unable to contain their grief, even as a man cries cut, heedless to all shame and ridicule, when face to face with some deadly terror. The sun turned away his face from the pitiable sight and entered the gates of the West; and black Night enveloped it in her murky folds. The gloom was relieved nowhere about the town by the bright Fires, reverently tended by their worshippers. No chanting of the holy mantras or melodious recitations of the Puranas broke the sorrowful silence. Utter darkness, physical, mental and moral, seemed to have swallowed Ayodhya and everything in it. The merchants cared not to open their shops. Joy and pleasure abandoned it to go after Rama. The fair city, till then resting peacefully in the shadow of the mighty arm of Rama, was now masterless and hideous to behold, even like the dun sky unrelieved by the stars or the moon. The women loved Rama with a love stronger

and deeper than what they had ever felt for the children born of their womb. Their hearts were torn with the grief they would have felt if their own children or brothers had been condemned to a hopeless and miserable exile. Music, dance, festivities, all were dead ; grief, sorrow, tears, groans, utter desolation everywhere. Not a shop was open, not a booth not a stall; a disgusting sight to behold, even as a dried up sea.

CHAPTER XLIX.

BEYOND KOSALA.

RAMA ever bore his father's commands at heart and put many a league between himself and Ayodhya ere the day dawned. They halted but to offer their morning prayers to the goddess of Twilight and reached the southern confines of Kosala passing by many a ploughed field, by many a happy village, by many a grove bright with flowers. Th inhabitants of the villages and hamlets on the way stood gazing at the strange sight of their beloved princes driving fast towards the forest and whispered to themselves loud enough to be overheard by Rama, "Our king is the biggest fool alive. He may search far and near and not come upon another like him, who in his dotage, plays the gallant and soils himself with the most heinous of sins to win a smile from the fickle lips of the siren Kaikeyi. Who ever knew wbat her cruel heart would stop at ? The most abandoned of sinners, ever intent upon wickedness and crime, harsh and cruel of speech, outraging all laws, human and divine, she could well drive to the forest her world-honor'd son, the soul of righteouness and compassion, our darling Rama of

boundless wisdom and stern self-control. She *is* a woman *par excellence*!! Seeta, the daughter of Janaka, is the favourite of fortune; made for a life of happiness and comfort, she has everything that life could offer in the shape of power and pomp, wealth and comfort, love and reverence; how could such a one face pain and misery, privation and want, danger and trouble? How did he dare to banish Rama to the dreary woods? Did he forget that he prayed and prayed for sixty thousand years to be blessed with such a son? Did he forget that Rama is the life and soul of his countless subjects? The fiercest beasts love their young ones more tenderly than he." Rama heard them in pained silence and passed on to the confines of Kosala.

They crossed the Vedasruti, a sacred stream, proceeded south for a long while, crossed again the Gomati that ever runs to the sea and saw its marshy sides covered with countless herds of kine. Another long drive and fast took them to the other side of the Syandika, half-hidden under the clouds of swans and peacocks. Rama turned to Seeta and said. "My dear! This is the boundary of the realm of Kosala. Manu Vaivasvata placed his son, the emperor Ikshwaku, in rule over the countries hereunto and the wealth of corn, kine and metals therein. Sumantra! would I once again roam with my parents through the flowery meads on the banks of the Sarayu and hunt in its forests? But, I pray you conclude not that I am inordinately fond of hunting. If one were addicted to that pastime in season and out of it, he would but ill-discharge his duty to his kingdom and his subjects. So, I hold it just that kings should hunt when the people are invaded by fierce beasts. Behold, it is utterly wicked and vicious to gamble; but it forms an integral

part of the holy sacrifice Rajasooya. Likewise, hunting is a pastime of the royal sages. Bow-men ever delight in hitting fast-moving targets. The chase that has helped to amuse the leisure of the royal sages, my ancestors, serves me likewise, now and then." Thus did he discourse sweetly on many a theme, and many a topic and helped his companions to while away the long hours of their journey.

CHAPTER L.

SRINGAVERAPURA.

RAMA, according to the traditions of his line, ought to have saluted the guardian deity of Ayodhya and taken leave of it when he departed from the city. But, intent on other things, he forgot to do so. So he stopped his chariot on the confines of South Kosala, reverently saluted the guardian deity of Ayodhya and prayed to her to crown with success his attempt to dwell in the forest for fourteen years. "Ayodhya, best of cities! proud capital of the kings of the Ikshwaku line! I salute in all reverence the gods that have their abode in you and those that protect you; pray give me leave to proceed and let me have your blessings to come back here at the end of fourteen years and behold you once again in the company of my parents." He turned aside to see large crowds that had come there to see him and stood with streaming eyes and wan faces. His heart was wrung at the piteous sight and hot tears started from his eyes. He raised his hands aloft and cried, "None knows better than myself your respect and love towards me; but it would only enhance and deepen your

grief to see me under the rod of adversity. Go back, good people all, and seek to forget your sorrow in the busy concerns of your life." They went round him in affectionate reverence and prepared to go back; but they could not take their eyes off him and, all unknowingly, followed him at a distance. They could never have enough of gazing at him and were bewailing their miserable fate, when, like the sun hidden by the darkness of the night, Rama disappeared from view at a turn of the road.

The kingdom of Kosala is rich in wealth and corn. It is the favourite resort of the good and the righteous. Fear is a thing unknown to those that live in it. A lovely sight at all times, it is dotted all over with sacrificial posts, indicating the scenes of former sacred rites. Every village and every hamlet is a miniature Ayodhya, with its groves and gardens and flocks of cattle. Well-watered and rich of soil, disease and anxiety are strangers throughout that vast kingdom. The chants of the Holy Scriptures rise upon the air everywhere. Rama passed with lightning speed through his kingdom, full of happy men, women and children, with everything that made life joyful to them. You cannot find any one on this broad earth that would not deem it the highest blessing that could fall to his share, to be the lord and ruler of Kosala; yet Rama cast it away from him as if it were a useless wisp of straw; marvellous indeed and all unthinkable, the fortitude of Ramachandra, who could gladly exchange the horrid forests for such a bright and happy empire.

They travelled further south and reached the banks of the Ganga, that courses through the heavens, the earth and the nether worlds. Its clear and sweet waters

wash away every sin and are ever resorted to by the holy sages. Numberless hermitages cover its banks. Its deep pools form the favourite resorts of lovely apsarasas, who come there to disport themselves in the cool waters. Devas and Danavas, Gandharvas and Kinnaras, male and female, are to be found at all times in the groves and hills on either side. The flowers that blossom on it are eagerly sought after in the swarga and the other worlds to worship the mighty gods with. The sound of its waters falling upon slabs of rock reminds one of a lovely woman clapping her hands in joyful laughter; the foam on its surface is her bright smile; the current running over the uneven ground is her dark braided locks; its slow eddies are the whirls of her navel. It runs through deep places with a grand sound as if of mridanga playing; it flows through sharp rocks with a noise fearful as that of thunder rolling. Bright with the brightness of the gods that bathe therein, it is hid here beneath a bank of blue lotuses; there, you come upon high ground for a long distance; here, bright patches of sand gleam in the sun; there, the swans, ruddy geese and water-fowls cry in mad joy; here, the tall trees on its banks are reflected in the water, as if they cast garlands around her neck; here, full-blown lotuses, utpalas, kumudas and kalhara flowers hide the stream; here, the pollen from the flowers lie thick and red, as if the current is mad and intoxicated; there, it shines pure and pellucid as crystal, without the slightest suspicion of speck or dirt. In the forests on its banks roam the huge elephants that support the quarters of the earth, with others that bear the high gods in state, while other maddened members of the group trumpet forth in mad intoxication. Gleaming with fruits, flowers, shoots, thick over-growths of creepers and birds, the

Ganga resembles a high-bred beauty dressed with exquisite care and taste. In its waters lie porpoises, crocodiles and serpents; sprung from the thrice-holy feet of Mahavishnu, falling on the earth from the matted locks of Sankara, the beloved consort of the Lord of the ocean, the celestial river, utterly pure in herself, washes away every stain, every sin from those that bathed in her. And Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta proceeded to Sringaverapura on its banks.

Rama turned to Sumantra and said, "Stop the horses. Here we stay for the night at the foot of yon huge ingudi tree near the river, bowed beneath its precious load of berries, fruits, shoots, leaves and flowers. Let us pay our respects to this holy stream, lauded by Devas, Danavas, Gandharvas, men, beasts and birds alike." Sumantra accordingly drove the chariot to that spot and when they had got down from it, unyoked the horses and stood with folded hands near Rama where he sat under the leafy shade.

Guha, the ruler of those parts, was a very dear friend of Rama; strong and mighty, he came of the race of the Nishadas. Made aware of Rama's arrival in his country, he hastened to pay him his humble respects and with him his aged ministers and kin. Rama and Lakshmana observed him while afar and joyfully advanced to meet him. Guha's heart sank within him as his eyes fell on the lowly hermit garb of Rama; yet he embraced him warmly and said, "Rama! It is not for me to say that this country is as much yours to command as Ayodhya. I and mine are your bounden slaves and await your behests." He offered him water to wash his hands and feet, placed before him various delicious fruits, roots and meat and said, 'Mighty One! I hope you had a safe journey here.

This forest is your own domains. We are your happy slaves and you are our lord and protector. I pray you accept from us food, conveyances, seats, horses, elephants and other articles of necessity and luxury; and resume your royal sway over this country which you have been pleased to delegate to me for a while."

The favorite Deity of Guha sought him out even where he was. Such an unexpected favour overwhelmed him with joy; he absolutely surrenderred to Him every thought of my and mine; he took refuge in His mercy for ever and for ever; and he but prayed to be allowed to reach the supreme goal of his aspirations—eternal and absolute service to the Lord of his heart.

Rama heard him out with unbounded pleasure, clasped him to his heart with his strong arms, firm and stout as the trunk of an elephant and said, "There be some who ever carp and cavil at whatever you may do to respect and honor them. I am mightily pleased at your coming on foot so far to see me; your words 'This wide forest is yours and we are your happy slaves' gladden my heart; thereby you have honored me above compare in every way. I hope I see you and your kin in good health and peace of heart. Is it all well with your kingdom? Are your friends happy and content? Is your wealth ever increasing? The sight of you infuses joy and happiness into my heart. I accept with supreme content the noble hospitality you have rendered me. But it is against my vow to accept and use anything from the hands of others. I seek to fulfil the commands of my honored sire and lead the life of a hermit, clad in deer-skin and bark of trees, feeding upon fruits, roots and other woodland fare. These coursers are my father's favourites, and they come in no less for a share of my love and care. Feed them well and you

have entertained us graciously with every hospitable rite."

Accordingly Guha directed his servants to look after the horses that bore to him his honored guest. Then Rama wore his dress of bark over his shoulders, offered his prayers to the Goddess of evening twilight, facing the west and partook of the pure water of the Ganga that Lakshmana brought him. He then composed himself to rest and Seeta by his side, while Lakshmana bathed their feet and took his stand under the tree. As Rama, an utter stranger all his life to privation and discomfort, formed to enjoy every delight and happiness that the world can give, supremely wise, of unblemished fame, and mighty of heart, lay asleep with Seeta by his side, Guha conversed with Lakshmana and Sumantra through the long hours of the night on the divine excellences of his royal friend and watched over them bow in hand.

CHAPTER LI.

LAKSHMANA LAMENTS.

GUHA observed that Lakshmana, out of his extreme love and devotion, kept awake to guard Rama and his heart was much pained thereat. "Child!" said he "here is a bed ready for you, soft and comfortable. Rest your weary limbs on it for a while. It comes natural to me and easy, and to my fellow hunters too here, to keep awake all night and rough it in these woods; all my days have been spent here. You can trust me to keep guard carefully over Rama and Seeta. You have been gently brought up and delicately; and this is no work for such as you. The worlds hold

no dearer object to me than Rama. I speak the veriest truth and, if you so desire, would swear it by the God of truth himself. I have placed all my hopes on him to secure unparalleled fame, virtue and wealth in this world, all thro' his grace. I and my kin will stand guard over Rama and Seeta, dearer to me than life, through the long hours of the night, with shaft on the string. What I know not about these forests is not worth knowing, for my life has been spent in it. I, my kin and my troops are more than a match for any enemies that might come against us in armed array."

"No talk of fear" replied Lakshmana "when *you* look after our safety; your soul is ever wedded to righteousness. Concern yourself not for me. How could you expect me to sleep when my lord and his gentle consort lie on the rough bare earth? I care not to waste a thought on my body, my life or its comforts. Gods and asuras may join hands and yet be swept away, like a withered leaf before a gale, by a poor shaft from the terrible bow of my brother. And that hero sleeps all comfortably on the bare ground, on rough grass and Seeta with him; what a terrible sight that!

"Long years did the king recite the Gayatri and the other mighty mantras to be blessed with Rama as his son; long and all faithfully did he keep with well-restrained senses, the vows and observances, kricchra chandrayana and others too severe to think of. Times out of number did he celebrate yagas, yagnas and other rites, which the holy Books enjoin on a barren father. After much trouble and travail a noble boy was born to him, his other self as it were, after sixty thousand years of heart-ache. And the fond father has at last driven his precious child to the dreary forests. Is it in human nature to survive the shock? I hope not. There

is not the slightest shadow of a doubt that the Goddess of earth is widowed of her lord and helpless. The ladies of the harem would, by now, have cried themselves hoarse over us and sleep the sleep of exhaustion and unconsciousness. Utter quiet, ominous and terrible, will keep watch over them.

"Kausalya, my mother, the other royal ladies and my father would, ere now, have departed for the Mansions of the Blessed. At the worst, they would not survive this night. Perhaps my mother may hold on to life, to behold her favorite child Satrughna once again, But Kausalya, the mother of that prince of heroes, would *never* survive her son's departure to the woods. The very thought tortures me past bearing. Every one at Ayodhya, the joy and pride of the world, every one, man, woman and child, was extremely devoted to king Dasaratha; and if they were to hear that he had departed this life, wailing and moaning, they would not lose a moment in following him wherever he might be. Rama is the first born of our monarch. Every grace, every excellence vies with one another to find a place in him; he lies nearer the heart of our father than any of us; the fond father cannot keep his life currents in his body, if he is away from Rama for a minute. It needs no saying that Kausalya, his faithful wife, would ever be by his side in this world or in the next. And you may be sure to find her friend Sumitra, my mother, ever in loving attendance upon her. 'I have been blessed with this priceless jewel of a boy after sixty thousand years of barrenness; he has grown to youth and manhood, safe and happy; he is mated to a lady in every way worthy of him; I can safely lay the burden of the state on his shoulders and spend the evening of my life in case and comfort'—such golden dreams have

been rudely shattered and for him life contains nothing to hold him back from the welcome arms of death. Poor soul! He has not the consolation of at least hoping to see his son crowned after him at the end of fourteen years; cruel grief will not spare him so long. Happy are they who remain with him during his last moments and render him every attention, every service possible; alas! *we* are denied that blessing.

"Ah! does the broad earth hold another city as beautiful and resplendant as Ayodhya? Heavy grief weighs down my heart when I recall its well-laid crossings, straight and beautiful roads, the mansions of the rich, the palaces of the princes, its groves, gardens, conservatories and pleasaunces. High bred courtesans flash through its streets like visions of beauty; stately chariots, fleet coursers and huge elephants throng the ways; gay sounds and solemn, gentle lay or martial music rise upon the air on every side; troops of men and women, gaily attired, lend an additional charm to the city, strangers to disease and sorrow; the splendour and pomp of the festivals and the holy fanes; the scenes of gaiety and joy in private houses—supremely blessed are they to whom it is given to dwell in that fair city, the favorite abode of everything that goes to make life happy and content. Think you that Dasaratha would keep his hold on life till we return from our exile? Think you we would be fortunate enough to touch the feet of the great One? Think you that we will enter the portals of Ayodhya after our sojourn in the forest as my brother had vowed, safe and happy, our sire's promise well kept?"

And on him so lamenting dawned a new day. It pained Guha beyond expression to listen to the words of grief that wrung the heart of Lakshmana, faithful

and true to the monarch, the queens and Rama; and like a noble elephant on whom terrible fever had laid its grip, he wept aloud with streaming eyes.

CHAPTER LII.

RAMA CROSSES THE GANGA.

AT daybreak Rama, the favorite of fame and valor, turned to Lakshmana and said "My dear boy! The Lord of day sends his messenger, the ruddy dawn, to announce his approach; the shades of night are fading fast. Lo! yon black koil welcomes us with melodious song. Did you notice that the cry of the wild peacocks is more sonorous and piercing than that of the tame ones we have at Ayodhya? The broad stream of the Ganga and its strong current preclude any possibility of crossing it without a boat. Make the necessary arrangements." Lakshmana communicated Rama's orders to Guha and Sumantra. The forest king bent his head in low obeisance and ordered his ministers to have in readiness a fine barge at the ferry, to cross the river safe and soon. They should carefully look to it that it is duly provided with good oars, rudder and sails. A skilful helmsman should be in attendance to take them over comfortably.

It was done and Guha approached Rama respectfully and said; "Master! The boat awaits you at yon landing place. I think you could cross the river in it safely enough. What are your orders? I pray you get into it."

"You have done more than enough" replied Rama "See that our spades, baskets, clothes, ornaments and

weapons are arranged in it." Then Rama and Lakshmana donned their armour, girt their quivers and swords and moved on to the landing place.

Sumantra noticing that Rama ordered not the chariot to follow, bowed in low reverence and said "Lord! What are my orders?" To which Rama replied, all gently, laying his hand upon his arm, "Sumantra! See that you return on the wings of speed to the side of our monarch. His orders were that we should drive thus far. We proceed afoot to the forests from here. So, you need not trouble yourself further on our account." The aged minister understood that he was ordered to return to Ayodhya; and with a face from which all joy, all peace had departed, he ventured to submit, "Do you, for a moment, think that any one in this wide world relishes your unfortunate lot to dwell for long years in these forests, like homeless wanderers, and Lakshmana and Seeta with you? If your noble self be thus a target for the arrows of Adversity, it seems to me as clear as anything that there is no merit, not the slightest, in celibacy, study of the vedic lore, compassion, or righteousness. If it were otherwise, how is it that they bear no fruit in you, whom all graces combine to adorn? You have chosen to dwell in the dark forests in the company of Lakshmana and Seeta and have ensured for yourself unparalleled fame as the lord of the three worlds, like unto Mahavishnu, who strode over the universe in three paces. At first, our hearts rejoiced at the anticipated life of happiness and content, when you should sit on the throne of your fathers. But cruel Kaikeyi dashed the cup from our lips. Later on, you seemed as if you would allow as to accompany you in your exile; but, you cast heavy sleep over us, and silently took yourself away from our midst. Therein

too have we been cruelly deceived by your good self; yet I entertained a last hope that you will be pleased to allow *me* at least, your old and faithful servant, to serve you; and now, you have put your foot down upon it, firmly and irrevocably. You have disappointed me in this too. Whichever way we turn, we are confronted with the ruins of our hopes and aspirations. And as if this were not suffering enough, you have arranged to leave us to the tender mercies of that monstrous sinner Kaikeyi. Eternal, hopeless woe and despair are our only portion." He despaired of seeing once again Rama, dearer to him than his very life and wept aloud long and ruefully, out of the bitterness of his heart.

He controlled himself somewhat, and sipped water to purify himself, when Rama addressed him gently and said, "The kings of the Ikshwaku line never had a more faithful friend than yourself. I lay this duty upon you to see that the king grieves not on my account. The snows of age lie heavy on him; he has been till now the absolute ruler of a vast empire; he has drained the cup of life to the full. But, his last years were doomed to see all his fair hopes blighted; terrible grief has befallen him in that the son of his heart is not by his side to gladden and comfort him; it is why I lay so much stress and importance on your going back to him. We should obey and follow our elders and masters and it is all unmeet that we should seek to drag them down to our level. So, the king should be instantly obeyed to the utmost, whatever he might order to delight the heart of the queen Kaikeyi. No one should gainsay kings, even if they act out of anger or misplaced affection; it is not for nothing that they are placed over us as our rulers. So behave that the king is not a prey to grief or disappointment. He is our

lord and ruler; hoary with age, of restrained senses, he is adorned with every noble virtue. He has been an utter stranger to anxiety or grief. Convey my humble respects to him with the prayer, 'May not your noble heart grieve in the least at the fancied thought that I nor Lakshmana nor Seeta ever bewail our sojourn in the forest; or recall with regret the years we spent at Ayodhya. I look forward happily to lay my head at yur royal feet at the end of fourteen years, which will pass away as fourteen seconds.' Next, convey my respectful enquiries to my mother and her friends and last, not least, to lady Kaikeyi. Seeta, Lakshmana and myself clasp with humble reverence the feet of queen Kausalya. Take it from me to our monarch that it would be for the best to bring down Bharata as soon as possible and have him crowned in all pomp and glory; for that is the surest antidote to the heart-ache engendered of my absence from the side of my father. And to Bharata, take this loving message, 'I would have you behave towards the royal ladies with as much respect and devotion as you would to the monarch himself. As Kaikeyi, your mother, is to you, so are Sumitra, the mother of Satrughna and Kausalya, my mother. Entrusted with the noble office of heir-apparent by our gracious king, you have it in your power to win happiness and fame here and hereafter."

This was a clear order for Sumantra to return; yet, his overwhelming grief and the close intimacy that had been his privilege to enjoy with Rama from his birth emboldened him to say, "I crave permission to submit somewhat. It is no empty compliment or courtier's flattery. Your humble servant am I; yet I have chosen to forget it and speak thus boldly. My supreme devotion to you and affection are my only excuse for it.

How can I bring myself to enter Ayodhya all alone, which grieves even as a fond father, from whom cruel death has taken away his only son, upon whom he lavished all his love? Those that till now had beheld me ever with you in this chariot, will, I am sure, die of broken hearts, if they were to see my miserable self go back with your place in it empty. They will cast their eyes upon this stately vehicle unilluminated by your presence and will faint with grief, even as a mighty army scatters itself when they see the driver sitting lone and forlorn in their general's chariot. Time and distance is nothing to them, for they ever enjoy your presence in their mind's eye. Food and sleep distract not their thoughts, ever centred in yourself. You had some idea of what they suffered when yon drove out of the city. Their confusion of heart and heaviness of spirits are simply beyond description. Heard you not the mighty sound that arose from them wailing when you started on your fateful journey? Verily, I know not what would become of them, if I go there alone and ill-omened, with black tidings for them. What message shall I take to Kausalya? Shall I say, 'I drove your son to his uncle's capital; concern yourself not about him'? Sweet words, but all untrue. Or, shall I speak the truth and say, 'I took leave of your son when the dark forests swallowed his bright form?' Alas! The noble queen would die on the spot, as if struck by chain-lightning. I know not what to do. Well, it is best to be silent.

"I may steel my heart to go back, but these horses will never have it so. They have borne, all joyfully, Seeta, Lakshmana and your noble self, and they will utterly refuse to draw the chariot if you are not in it. Now, how can I go back to Ayodhya without you?

"Grant me, out of your boundless compassion, to share your forest home. If you still turn a deaf ear to my prayers and harden your heart, that very instant I will mount the chariot and throw myself along with it into the raging flames. I submit that I could, from the car, keep away everything, man or beast, that might interfere with your tapas. I have known it all along, ages ago, that you are to take human form in the line of Ikshwaku. So, I mastered this art of chariot-driving, looked down by gentlefolk and heeded not my state and dignity as a member of the monarch's council, only to secure a chance to serve you by driving your chariot. And you have been gracious enough to confer upon me that envied honor. I but ask to be continued in my service to you during your stay in the forest. Grant me the precious boon of ever being with you. These horses will secure happy states of existence hereafter by rendering you humble service in the forest. On my head and eyes be it to serve you in every possible way, day or night. Nor Ayodhya, nor the bright worlds of the gods, nor the serene peace of Liberation has any charms for me. Desperate sinners can never hope to enter paradise; how can I, blacker than any, enter Ayodhya without you? My heart longs to remain with you through your period of exile and drive you back to Ayodhya in this very chariot. The fourteen years will flash away even as fourteen winks of the eye, if I am with you; but, away from your delighful presence, every second is an eternity of torment to me. Was there ever a master that loved his servants so well as yourself? Is it not but bare justice that my place is ever with the son of my lord and master? I entreat you not to leave me behind. My mind is made up to be with you wherever you are."

Rama was, by nature, supremely compassionate to all beings; and to such as sought refuge with him and knew no other protector, to such servants of his, he evinced boundless affection and sympathy. So he turned to Sumantra and said "I am yet to see another servant like yourself, faithful to the uttermost to his masters. No one knows better than I your love and devotion to me. Would I ask you to go back to Ayodhya if I had not serious reasons for it? First and foremost, Kaikeyi will rest assured that I obeyed her commands and have repaired to the forest. She will be delighted thereat and regard the virtuous king as a man of his word. Bharata will get the throne and realise, to the full, the heart-wishes of Kaikeyi. This is my first duty and must be looked to, at once. So, have the kindness to return to the city and convey my messages to the respective parties." And he consold the broken hearted Sumantra as best as he could.

He next addressed himself to Guha and said "You should not insist upon my taking up my abode here with you; it is too near the city. My father's orders require me to dwell in some holy hermitage and my resolve too lies that way. Again, Kaikeyi has said 'You shall abide for fourteen years in the forests of Dandaka with matted hair and clad in deerskin and bark of trees', I mean to observe such vows and observances as will compel the wonder and admiration of the very hermits themselves and ensure unexampled bliss in the other worlds, for myself, Seeta and Lakshmana. And now, dear friend, it is time that I matted my hair. Oblige me by sending for the milk of the banian."

It was done; Rama and Lakshmana matted their fair hair and took upon themselves the life and duties of the hermits according to the Vaikhanasa mode. Rama

matted his hair—Rama with long arms that reached down to his knees like the trunk of an elephant, Rama adorned with every excellence of body, mind and heart. Woe unspeakable ! Yet Rama and Lakshmana shone with boundless radiance, like maharshis even in that lowly garb. "Friend" said Rama to Guha "continue your watchful care over your kingdom, its fortresses, troops and treasure" and walked down to the landing place. The barge awaited him there. "Lakshmana!" said he "see to it carefully that the noble daughter of Janaka gets into the boat first and take your place in it." Lakshmana guessed his purpose and obeyed him accordingly. Rama got in last and recited the mantras prescribed for Brahmanas and Kshatriyas to ensure a safe passage across the rivers. They then sipped water from the holy stream and bowed in reverence to it. Rama then graciously dismissed Sumantra, Guha and his followers, took his seat and ordered the rowers to give way.

They set themselves to the joyful task with a will and the barge was nearing the middle of the stream, when Seeta clasped reverent hands and prayed: "Mother Ganga! may my lord and master sojourn for ten years and four in the forest, keeping well his promise to the king and return safe and happy to Ayodhya with Lakshmana and myself. Then will I render worship meet and adoration to you. You course through the heavens, the earth and the nether worlds; you begin to manifest yourself in the world of Brahma; and the lord of the ocean is your happy spouse. Mother divine! I bow my head to you in reverence and raise my voice in humble prayer. Grant me that my lord returns safe and happy and sits on the throne of his fathers; and I will give away to holy Brahmanas, countless kine, clothes and

sweet food. On my return to Ayodhya, my first care shall be to worship you, the other deities here, Manikarnika and the other sacred bathing places, Kasi and the other sanctified spots, with offerings of varied meats and thousands of honey-pots. I pray you fulfil the dearest wish of my heart that the righteous brothers should live their period of exile in peace and happiness, and return to Ayodhya in safety." Meanwhile the barge touched the other bank and they got down from it.

Then Rama turned to Lakshmana and said "Henceforth we are to live by ourselves in these forests where man lives not. So, I enjoin you to look after the safety of Seeta and give your best attention to it. Lead the way; Seeta comes after you; and I walk in the rear, guarding you as it were. Henceforth, we must watch over one another. There had been no occasion till now to call forth our endurance and fortitude. Seeta will, this day, have a taste of what the rough forest life is like. She is to enter the forest proper, untenanted by man, with no villages or hamlets to relieve the vast loneliness, and cut up by rough uneven paths interspersed with deep chasms".

Accordingly Lakshmana took his place in the front; Seeta followed next and Rama came last. Sumantra gazed long and steadily at Rama as he crossed the Ganga and proceeded beyond. Then, distance gradually blurred the fair vision and he raised his voice and wept in the bitterness of his heart. Rama resembles in might the Lords of the planets; he has it in him to accomplish to the utmost, the wishes of those that depend upon him; still, as became a great One, he bound himself to obey the commands of his elders and underwent many a trouble. They crossed the Ganga, and entered the kingdom of the Matsyas, rich in wealth and

corn and teeming with its happy millions. The brothers killed the wild boar, the white-footed antelope, the spotted antelope and Maharuru (a species of deer) and other pure animals, cooked their flesh and at sunset, sought the foot of a large tree to take their first forest meal.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE SEARCHER OF HEARTS.

WHEN they had offered their evening prayers and had finished their supper, Rama turned to Lakshmana and said "This is the first night we spend outside our kingdom all alone. Sumantra is not with us; grieve not thereat. Henceforth, we should keep watch at nights; for, we are responsible for the safety of Seeta. Let us gather the grass and the leaves hereabouts to make us a bed and pass the night anyhow." And Rama, accustomed all his life to take his repose on soft and rich beds, reclined his limbs on the leaves and bare ground. Said he to Lakshmana "My dear boy! Now the king suffers unusual grief and prays for sleep that will never come. But Kaikeyi is in the seventh heaven of joy, her heart's wishes realised to the utmost. She may even dare to make away with our father that the kingdom might vest in Bharata permanently. All helpless is he and sinking under the infirmities of old age; I am not by to wait on him; slave to his passions, he is a helpless victim in the toils of Kaikeyi. Alas! What will become of him! When I ponder upon the misfortunes that have befallen me and on our righteous father, enthroning love and passion in his heart, and utterly oblivious to other pursuits, virtue and wealth, I am almost inclined to hold that

Pleasure holds a higher place in the Aims of life than Virtue or Wealth. Lo, our wise parent! Utmost folly cannot debase a man so much as to incite him to banish his dutiful and only son to the frightful forests, and all to win the fickle smile of a woman. Bharata will rule happily without a rival over the broad realm of Kosala, rich in wealth and corn, surrounded by his wife and children, kith and kin. Dasaratha, our aged sire, has one foot in the grave; I am put out of the way; and now, Bharata is the undisputed monarch of these boundless domains. He who devotes himself solely to the pursuit of pleasure and neglects virtue and wealth, will, like our father, suffer grievously. It seems to me that Kaikeyi came in our family but to torture Dasaratha to death, to drive me to the forest and to secure the kingdom for her son Bharata.

"In the intoxication of her new-gotten power and wealth, Kaikeyi will spare Kausalya and Sumitra no tortures, for the crime of being related to me. There is a show of justice in Kausalya's case, as she is my mother. But, it is gross injustice and extremely atrocious that Sumitra should come in for a share of it. So, I advise you to lose no time. Go back to Ayodhya at day-break. We have not come far. Seeta and I will proceed to the forests of Dandaka. The helpless Kausalya will surely find comfort and courage in your presence. Kaikeyi is up to anything. It is nothing to her if the world pours its hatred and contempt upon her; nothing is too mean for her, nothing too atrocious. I would that you place my mother in the charge of the virtuous Bharata.

"I believe that in her former births Kausalya ought to have torn mothers apart from their children; else, I see no reason why she should suffer nameless

torments, torn from the side of her favourite child. She went through fire and water, as it were, to call me her son; she took a world of trouble in bringing me up to man's estate.' Mother beget children and tend them fondly and with care, only that they, in their turn, should form the prop and stay of their old age. Now, Kausalya has laboured in vain, and has been cruelly deprived of the fruit thereof. Fie upon me! My life is barren of its purpose. I pray that no mother beget such an ungrateful son as myself. Lakshmana! The only return I make to my mother for all the trouble and care she has bestowed on me, is the measureless grief and despair I have caused her. Better I were not born. Brother! You remember a linnet that Kausalya used to rear so fondly. It would often turn to the parrot, its neighbour, and cry, 'Tear at the fee of yon cat, the relentless foe of your race.' Kausalya used to take great delight in those words of the bird. I am powerless to give her even that pleasure which the senseless bird is grateful enough to cause her.

"The hapless Kausalya, consumed with grief, is barren, though the world calls her the fortunate mother of Kosala's heir. But how have I benefited her in the least? I have plunged her in an ocean of grief, shoreless and unfathomable. My anger is powerful enough to wrest this Kosala, nay, this broad earth, from the hands of man, god or Asura; my shafts will do it for me. But, my Dharma will suffer in observance, if I put forth my might, forgetful of all other considerations. My hands are tied by my fear of the world's scorn that will point its finger at me and cry 'Lo! Rama has put behind him Dharma and has elected to walk in the path of the unrighteous, of the ungodly;' I fear too that I might be denied a place in the bright worlds on high. Else, this

very moment I can seat myself on the throne of the Ikshvakus." And he bewailed his lot and his powerlessness to avoid it; burning tears of grief coursed down his cheeks and a fit of gloomy silence came over him.

When he had ended, like a fire that had burnt itself out or like the broad ocean after a storm, Lakshmana sought to console him and said "Brother mine! Best and foremost of heroes! It needs no saying that Ayodhya will be shorn of its lustre, like a moonless night, when you have denied it your bright presence. Ideal prince! It is not meet that you grieve thus. You but wring the heart of Seeta and myself. You bear a name that is significant of the perennial joy and delight that flows from you to all the worlds; does it become you to make others grieve? You but deprive the fish of its life when you deprive it of the element where nature has placed it; even so, you but deprive us of our lives the moment you deny us your sweet presence. This is my only reply to your commands to me to return to Ayodhya at day-break. I care not in the least to enter paradise or to see Dasaratha, Satrughna or Sumitra if you are not there with me."

They composed themselves to sleep and Rama was delighted to hear Lakshmana express himself so candidly and so lovingly; he decided to spend the fourteen years in the forests with Lakshmana and lead the life of the hermits there. The mighty princes, though in the midst of cruel beasts that ranged the woods of nights, were entire strangers to fear or apprehension in those lonely regions.

CHAPTER LIV.

BHARADWAJA.

THEY rested for the night at the foot of the banyan tree and resumed their journey the next-morning. They entered the forest and proceeded to Prayaga, the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna, feasting their eyes on many a lovely spot, many a rare and wonderful object, and hospitably entertained by the people they met, until the shades of night warned them to stop. Then Rama turned to Lakshmana and said "Behold the sky is black with smoke all around Prayaga to a very great distance. I guess it springs from the sacrificial fires of some maharshi hereabouts. Listen to the tremendous roar of two mighty streams dashing against one another. We are at the junction of the Ganga and the Yamuna. The woodlanders have laid up yonder piles of split wood outside the hermitage of maharshi Bharadwaja." They walked on for over an hour and at nightfall came to the hermitage of Bharadwaja, pleasantly situated at the confluence of the holy streams. The beasts and the birds thereabouts scampered off at the sight of the strangers. They wanted to pay their respects to the maharshi, but stood a little way off his abode until the evening offerings to the fire were over. Then one of the disciples of the sage came out of the asrama, through whom they announced their arrival to the maharshi; invited to enter, they beheld Bharadwaja in the midst of his disciples after their evening prayers.

They joined folded palms of reverence to the great One who had strictly observed the most severe vows and austerities; his heart was ever centred in

meditation upon the Lord; and past, present and future held no secrets for him. "Lord!" said Rama, "We are the sons of Dasaratha king of Ayodhya. Rama am I named and this, my brother, Lakshmana. This is my wife Seeta, the daughter of king Janaka of Mithila. She has been an ideal wife to me and has followed me with much entreaty and prayer to share my forest life. Lakshmana is devoted to me and asked to accompany me in my wanderings when my father ordered me to reside in the forest; and he has ever been a man of his word. We seek to fulfil the Dharma of carrying out the behests of our sire and make the forest our home, fruits and roots our only food."

Bharadwaja offered them suitable rights of hospitabily and with great solicitude and care, comfortably arranged for their meals and repose. His high ascetic merit influenced even the birds and beasts thereabouts and they were extremely friendly and confiding towards the residents of the holy abode. Bharadwaja and his pupils kindly enquired about their safe journey thither. "Thanks to the favor we are fortunate to find in the eyes of your Reverence" replied Raghava and took the seats offered them by the sage. Then the Blessed One addressed Rama and said "Your image is enshrined in my heart of hearts all along, though the senses and the intellect reach you not. Supremely blessed am I in being able to behold you in this my retreat after so many years of waiting. Words fail me to describe my good fortune. I had news of your being exiled to the forest by Dasaratha for no fault of yours. This spot, the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna, is extremely holy; far away from the world's strife and bustle, it delights the eye and the heart; and you may fix your abode some where here." To which Rama replied "Holy sir! I

submit that this is too near Ayodhya and easy of access. The people would go over here very often to see me, Lakshmana and Seeta. Hence I would seek a more distant spot. Pray direct me to another suitable hermitage where this Seeta, delicately nurtured, might live happily. Solitude and undisturbed privacy is what I look for."

"Ten krosas from here" replied Bharadwaja "is a hill called Chitrakoota. It reminds you of the Gandhamadana mountain; it is a very holy place, resorted to by the maharshis. It is lovely in every way and forms the favorite haunt of bears and monkeys. It has the peculiar merit of cleansing the hearts and intensifying the good tendencies of those that live within sight of its peaks. Numerous rishis have performed stern tapas on it and have gone to heaven in their tenements of flesh. I believe it is attractive and quiet enough. Or if you so desire, you may share my abode with me." The righteous Bharadwaja, whose love and affection for Rama knew no bounds, entertained them most nobly.

They passed the night in discoursing on themes high and holy and at day-break repaired to Bharadwaja and said "Your Reverence! We spent a very happy night in this hermitage, thanks to your kind care and consideration. Grant us leave to proceed to the spot you have chosen for our abode." And the sage took leave of them saying "I wish you a safe and pleasant journey to Chitrakoota where you will never want for fruit, roots, honey and other hermit fare. Lovely groves, peacocks, deer and elephants will delight your eyes at every step. I am sure your days will pass very pleasantly there, beholding the wonders of the mountain, the cataracts, the waterfalls, the valleys, the torrents, the koil, the magpie and other birds of charming plumage.

CHAPTER LV.

CHITRAKOOTA.

THEY reverently went round Bharadwaja, took leave of him and journeyed on to Chitrakoota. The sage, who loved them as his children, showered his choicest blessings on them and would go with them a part of the way, giving his parting directions as it were. "Rama! Reach the confluence of Ganga and the Yamuna and travel on due west along the banks of the Kalindi until you come upon a likely place to cross it. Later on, a huge banyan, named Syama, will meet your eye. It is the favourite resort of many a Siddha. Seeta will not fail to salute the guardian Spirit thereof and pray at its hands the fulfilment of her wishes. You may rest there awhile if you need it; else, you may travel on straight a krosa further until you espy a dark forest thick with palasa, jujube and bamboo trees. There lies the way to Chitrakoota. Many a time have I travelled thither. It is a lovely path and carpeted with soft sand. You are perfectly safe from any forest fires if you take that road;" and Bharadwaja, all reuctantly, turned towards his hermitage.

Rama and his party saluted him reverently, and promised to obey his directions; and after a while Rama addressed himself to Lakshmana and said "I would have you know that we owe Bharadwaja's unique favour towards us to our incalculable merit in former births." They reached the banks of the Kalindi but were at a loss to cross it, so strong was the current. Lakshmana felled down some logs, tied bamboos athwart them with strong creepers and spread soft leaved branches of

the jambu and the vetasa on it for Seeta to sit on comfortably. Rama gave his arm to her as she got upon the raft; and the beautiful lady felt a little shy at her husband showing her this attention in the presence of another. The brothers placed near her, her cloths and ornaments, their weapons, baskets, spades and other implements, got into it and crossed the river. As the craft neared the middle of the stream, Seeta clasped her hands in reverent prayer to the Goddess of the river and said. "Gracious lady! Grant that every good may go with us; grant that my lord fulfils his vow and returns to Ayodhya safe and happy, and I will gratify your heart with offerings of countless kine and winepots." They reached the southern bank, prepared another raft and crossed the swift coursing Yamuna.

They walked on for a while and caught a glimpse of the huge banyan tree, Syama, dark with foliage, cool and shady. Seeta addressed herself to the Spirit of the tree and said "Lord of the forest! I salute you. May my husband fulfil his vow. May I be spared to behold Kausalya and Sumitra once again." She then went round the tree in humble reverence. Rama observed, with an amused smile, Seeta praying for his safety and happiness so lovingly and said to Lakshmana "Boy! Do you go to the front. I will come last and weapon in hand, guard you from the rear. Look to it that you bring her whatever she may fancy—fruit, flower or anything rare and lovely." Seeta walked on between them, even as a cow-elephant between two maddened bulls. It was her first visit to the virgin forests and she pointed to every tree, plant, creeper and flower and asked Rama its name, its qualities and its uses. At once Lakshmana would bring her anything she may choose to ask for. Seeta was delighted at the brooks

and the rivulets where the crystal water ran shallow over the many-colored sand, while swans and other water-fowl disported themselves on it. They walked on for two krosas more and had a hearty meal on the flesh of some deer that roamed the woods on the banks of the Yamuna. They had a pleasant stroll in the delightful woods, the brothers calling Seeta's attention to the rare and wonderful trees, birds and beasts, until night fell, when they came back to the banks of the Jumna and prepared their beds for the night.

CHAPTER LVI.

THEIR FOREST ABODE.

NEXT morning Rama awoke Lakshmana and said, "Dear boy! Listen to the melodious sounds of the denizens of this forest. It is time we were on our journey." Lakshmana shook off his fatigue and stiffness and they hastened through their morning bath, prayers and worship. Very soon they proceeded on the path pointed out by Bharadwaja. Rama now and then turned to Seeta and said "Behold, my love, these kimsuka trees, completely hidden under the flowering garments thrown over them by Spring; at a distance they look like so many trees aflame. The Bhallataka trees bend under their heavy burden of fruits, flowers and foliage. It is a pity there are none to enjoy their beauties. I could spend long years of happiness here, feasting my eyes on these lovely sights. From each tree hangs a respectably big comb of honey, gathered with great care and industry by the ever busy bees. Lakshmana! Listen to the lapwing as it calls out sweetly from the lovely bowers furnished with soft

beds of fallen flowers. The peacock replies to it. There the lofty peaks of the Chitrakoota come into view. Countless heads of elephants range over it, while the mountain itself is hid under the clouds of birds. We will roam pleasantly through the dense woods that cover the valleys at its foot." And so, they approached the mountain, teeming with beasts, birds, crystal water, fruits and roots. Rama turned to Lakshmana and said "Verily, Chitrakoota improves upon acquaintance. I am sure you will have a plentiful supply of water, fruits and roots; you can trust to come upon many a hermitage of the maharshis hereabouts; and we will do well to stay here for a while." [' We have often looked on that green hill; it is the holiest spot of that sect of the Hindu faith who devote themselves to this incarnation of Vishnu. The whole neighbourhood is Rama's country. Every head-land has some legend, every cavern is connected with his name; some of the wild fruits are still called *Seetaphala*, being the reputed food of the exiles. Thousands and thousands annually visit the spot, and round the hill is a raised foot-path, on which the devotee, with naked feet, treads full of pious awe.'—*Calcutta Review* Vol. XXIII].

They then proceeded to where the holy Valmeeki abode and saluted him reverently. He showed his royal guests every hospitality he could and kindly enquired after their safe journey thither. Rama replied " May it please your holiness! I am Rama, the son of Dasaratha, king of Ayodhya; this is my brother Lakshmana and that Seeta my wife. We have come here to stay for fourteen years as our father has commanded us to do."

He turned to Lakshmana and said "Cut down some strong jambu trees and build a log-house for us to

dwell in. I would stay here a while." Lakshmana lost no time in erecting a snug cottage; it was comfortably provided against wind and weather, with strong walls, charming rooms and thick mats in place of doors. All alone he worked at it and it was lovely thing to see. He eagerly awaited next any fresh commands that Rama might have for him, which observing, Raghava smiled and said "We should make offerings of deer's meat to the Gods of the quarters that protect this cottage. If we desire a long and happy life, we should duly perform the rites enjoined by the sastras on the occasion of taking possession of a newly built house and propitiate the bhootas, the pretas and the pisachas that haunt the spot. So, we avoid fear, disease or loss of those near and dear to us and enjoy a long life and happy even as the Immortals in heaven. You need not apprehend any sin from taking away the lives of sensient creatures. The animals offered in the Yagnas rise to the bright worlds of bliss."

Lakshmana obeyed his orders, whereupon Rama said "Have this flesh well-cooked. This day augurs permanency of our stay here; and the asterism, the day of the fortnight and the muhoorta are similarly inclined. Long shall we stay here and joyfully." When the flesh had been nicely cooked to a turn and the blood dried off, Lakshmana turned to his brother and said "You see that the flesh of this black-spotted antelope is well-cooked. Your god-like self is well conversant with the rules of sacrifice and may proceed to perform the rites to propitiate the gods." Rama purified himself by a bath and went though the necessary rites on the occasion of taking possession of a newly-built house, omitting no detail. Profoundly versed in the holy mantras, himself the very embodiment of those mantras,

what was it about them he was ignorant of? He propitiated Agni, Varuna and the forty-five deities presiding over a house, with offerings, sacrifices, worship and flowers; he purified himself again and entered the cottage. With a cheerful heart, he made the several Vaisvadeva offerings and performed the Yagas in honor of Vishnu and Rudra. Next followed the Punyahavachana, the Grihasanti and the recitations of the sacred texts to ward off any evil that might befall them during their residence in the cottage. He purified himself and the materials once again with water from the taint consequent on his having performed the Rudrayaga and proceeded to lay out offerings to all the elementals, with special reference to the malevolent and cruel beings that wander about day and night, seeking whom they may harm. Altars as adorn the hermitages of holy ascetics, shrines for the worship of Vishnu and the other mighty Presences, were laid out according to the Books and the respective gods were installed there to the chant of the holy mantras. The Spirits of the elements were duly propitiated with offerings of flowers, fruits, cooked meats, libations, holy grass, sacred fuel and vedic recitations; in an auspicious moment Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta entered the cottage, so skillfully built by Lakshmana of boughs, leaves and creepers and abode there happily, even as the shining Ones enter their resplendent hall of Sudharma.

With restrained senses and mind, they led a happy life in that forest, teeming with various beasts, birds, flowers and fruits and echoing to the sounds of serpents, elephants, tigers, bears, deer and other animals of the forest. They played about in the cool crystal waters of the pools, lakes and rivers; they gathered the flowers of the seasons and missed not a single joy or delight of the

forest life. On the sides of that pleasant mountain Chitrakoota, on the banks of the sacred Malyavati Rama spent his days as a hermit, free from cankering care or anxiety and never regretted his exile from Ayodhya.

CHAPTER LVII.

SUMANTRA RETURNS TO AYODHYA.

GUHA, with a breaking heart, watched along with Sumantra until Rama and his party were lost in the distance; he could not enough enlarge upon the superhuman excellences of his friend; for all that, he had to return sad and disappointed to his quarters. Later on, he informed Sumantra of the news brought him by his messengers, of Rama's movements, their visit to the hermitage of Bharadwaja, their stay with him at Prayaga and their journey towards the Chitrakoota. Sumantra then had nothing left for him to do but to take leave of Guha. He yoked his reluctant horses to the chariot and sorrowfully wended his way back to Ayodhya. Fragrant woods, lovely rivers and lakes, happy hamlets and towns greeted his eye, but he saw them not; and at the evening of the third day, he entered the joyless capital. No stir of human life; all silent like a ruined city of the past. It threw a chill on his spirits and he said to himself "Has this Ayodhya been consumed to ashes by the burning grief of separation from Rama, the gorgeous city teeming with elephants, horses, people, princes and kings?" He urged his jaded horses and neared the gates of the city.

But there were crowds and crowds of men, women and children who saw him from afar and hemmed him

on all sides crying, "Our Rama! what has become of him?" And Sumantra replied to them "My good people! That great One allowed me to proceed with him only as far as the Ganga; and his orders were upon me to return to Ayodhya." The tears of the people streamed afresh at these terrible news and they sighed heavily as they cried "Wonderful! Incredible! verily our sins are beyond count and unspeakably heinous, to return for us this dreadful harvest of grief. Fie upon our lives! Rama! How had you the heart to go away from us, knowing full well that despair and grief would be our only portion?" They gathered in knots everywhere and exclaimed, "A curse on our miserable lives, who erstwhile beheld this very same chariot adorned with Rama and Seeta and are not ashamed to behold it now dark and hideous, unilluminated by their glorious presence. Rama was the life and soul of us all. You are sure to find him wherever any one of us gives away in charity; he would watch carefully whether the gift is made at the right time and place and to a deserving object. You cannot miss him from any yaga or yagna; he would ascertain whether the wealth used therein was fairly acquired; he would be ever at hand to clear any doubts as the procedure or the ritual; you can rely upon him to remind you of any lapse or mistake ere it is too late. You will find him at weddings, making anxious enquiries about the parity of the parties in birth, character and wealth and whether the match was a suitable one from all points of view. If considerations of wealth threaten to break off such an alliance, his generosity would ever remove the obstacle. He would not allow the slightest detail of the religious rites to be omitted. Yagas, yagnas, feasts, festivals, there was no public activity at Ayodhya but he was there to see that

thing went off well. Ah! is it given to us to behold that noble One again? The protector of us all, who eagerly and untiringly sought out everything that could conduce to our pleasure, benefit our well-being and fulfil our heart's wishes to the utmost—he has gone away from our midst, he who watched over us with paternal care; and alas! we live to see that evil day." And so, wailed and grieved the women of Ayodhya, from the lofty mansions and stores that lined the royal road while Sumantra took his way to the King's palace, his heart heavy with a grief that he could share with none and his ears and eyes pained with sights and sounds which he was impotent to relieve.

He feared that his iron fortitude might break under the strain; he covered his face and drove on fast to where Dasaratha abode, and passed through seven courts. The people stood at the palace gates in dense crowds, their hearts full of dark forebodings at Dasaratha's long absence and desperate plight. The women of the palace, who eagerly looked forward to see Sumantra return with Rama, received a terrible shock when they beheld the aged minister driving back in the lonely chariot and cried "Alas! Alas!" in the bitterness of their grief. They stared at one another in blank amaze like a parcel of lunatics. The royal ladies saw him arrive and trooped into the apartments of Kausalya in eager expectation of the news that Sumantra had brought. They talked to one another in low whispers, as Dasaratha was near. "He that went out of the city with Rama in his chariot has even come back into it without him! We would hear what he would say to Kausalya, who is tortured with indescribable grief. Marvellous indeed is her fortitude or her hold on life even after her darling son Rama had been exiled to

the forest. She and she alone is equal to the terrible task." Sumantra heard it but too distinctly; dare he say nay? His sorrow grew upon him every moment. He entered the eighth court and the last, only to find it dull and gloomy, and Dasaratha lying senseless with the grief of separation from his son. He drew near, bowed low over joined palms and delivered the message of Rama. Dasaratha listened to it in silence and fell on the ground in a dead faint, his grief overpowering his iron will. Every one cried "Ha! Ha!" while Kausalya and Sumitra sprang forward to raise him up and lead him back to his bed.

Then, she that bore Rama raised her voice and cried in her grief "Magnanimous king! Here stands the messenger sent by my son from his forest abode—my son who has chosen to walk upon a path that none else would dare to tread. Speak to him. Why silent! It came to you smooth and easy enough to grant Kaikeyi whatever boons she might ask and glad was your heart then. Rama betook himself to the forest in consequence; marvellous indeed it is to see you betray shame and grief thereat. I would like to know what stood in the way of your calculating all these chances before. Get up, please. What have you to do with the grief or sorrow or the broken hearts of others? You have the proud consolation of having kept your word to your favourite queen and you have laid up especial merit thereby. That is more than enough. But my wretched self am powerless to share my grief with others. All alone and unaided I must bear my cross. Think you to console me by pretending to grieve overmuch? That were a waste of a rare commodity with you, for I see through your wiles: I have torn the mask off your face and see your true self behind it. Perhaps you cry and rave to

keep up appearances and stand well with the world, which will point a finger of scorn at you and exclaim 'Lo! The unnatural father'. You may spare yourself that anxiety, for the world is but too well acquainted with the esteem you hold your poor Rama in. May be you do not like to ask Sumantra of any news from Rama, afraid of Kaikeyi's accusing eye. Fear not; Kaikeyi is nowhere to be found here; take heart and speak out." Tears choked her utterance and she fell down like an uprooted tree and fainted away.

Kausalya's laments, her dead faint, Dasaratha staring stupidly before him—such strange and dreadful sights were too much for the royal ladies there and they raised their voices and cried plaintively. The attendants took it up; the crowds that stood outside prolonged it, until the palace of the king, its precincts, nay, Ayodhya far and near, resounded with cries, wails, laments, groans and moans. The city seemed like a storm-tossed ocean stirred to its very depths, even as it was when Rama went away from it.

CHAPTER LVIII.

RAMA'S MESSAGE.

DASARATHA came back to himself after a while; burning with anxiety to know the message his darling boy had sent him, he called out to Sumantra who stood before him with humble reverence. Bowed beneath the weight of sixty-thousand years, restless even as a beast just caged from the forest, sighing like an elephant stricken with some strange disease, Dasaratha, whose thoughts were ever with Rama, turned

to Sumantra whose hot tears cut themselves channels thro' the dust and dirt that bore witness to his fast and furious driving, and said "Sumantra! My Rama, the soul of virtue, where does he rest, under what tree? Brought up in the lap of luxury and comfort, what dainty fare could he hope for in the wild forests? All unfit to meet the slightest discomfort or privation, how could my son, who is, of right, the master of this broad earth and all it contains, stretch his wearied limbs on the hard ground like a waif stranded on the rocks of adversity? Ever attended by his guards and regiments, how could he bring himself to pass long years of weary loneliness in the forest solitudes? How could Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta reconcile themselves to roam through the trackless forests infested with pythons, black cobras, tigers and other fierce creatures? I could never believe that my boys walked through the thorny jungles and rough woodland paths and with them the daughter of Janaka, whose face even the winds of heaven were not allowed to visit too roughly. Sumantra! I take it that you saw with your own eyes my children enter the dark forests, even as the bright Aswins enter the caves in the mount Mandara. I envy your good fortune. What said Rama? And Lakshmana, what word did he send to us here? Had Seeta any message for us? Tell us all, and take care that you omit not the slightest detail—where Rama sat, ate or slept, what he did and what he said. Once upon a time the emperor Yayati was hurled from heaven and prayed Indra that he might fall in the midst of good men. He landed where Sibi and the other great Ones were assembled; they lightened his sorrow and nest him back to heaven. Even so, I will keep back my fleeting life-breaths by drinking in your descriptions of his divine excellences."

Sumantra could not speak for his tears; yet he managed to blurt out. "Your majesty! Ramachandra, with his eye ever set on the utter observance of the traditions of his line, joins humble palms of reverence and salutes you. Said he to me 'Good friend! convey it to my sire that I lay my head at his feet and salute the wise one, whom, all beings honor themselves, in honoring. Convey my salutations and kind enquiries to every one in the royal palace, as beseems their rank and station.

"'Tell my mother Kausalya that I salute her respectfully and make affectionate enquiries after her health and peace of heart. Deliver the following message to her, carefully omitting nothing. 'Mother mine! I pray that your heart be ever centred in the due observance of Dharma. Fail not to tend the Holy Fires. You should ever wait at the feet of his majesty, as if he were a mighty god. Behave towards the other royal ladies with kindness and affiability, putting away from you every notion of your high birth, the pride and haughtiness consequent on your being the queen consort of the mightiest emperor on earth. Make no difference in your attitude towards his majesty and lady Kaikeyi. Look upon Bharata as the ruling emperor and render him due respect. Bear in mind the maxim of kingly polity 'Kings count their age not by days and years, but by their wealth and power'; Bharata is younger than you and a son; but none the less should you treat him with every mark of reverence and obedience.'

"'Convey my affectionate enquiries to Bharata and tell him from me 'I would have you make no difference, not the slightest, in your treatment of the royal ladies. Keep our sire in the kingdom even after you are crowned

and continue to render him all honor and respect as before, omitting not the least detail. Long years has he lived in this world before us; it behoves you to take his advice in everything and gainsay him not. Enjoy with moderation and prudence the unbounded power and wealth that have been entrusted to you.' Rama next bethought himself with tears of his mother, exposed to the taunts and insults of others and of his miserable lot, that denied him the pleasure and privilege of being by her side and rendering her affectionate service. So, he added 'You will oblige me by making no difference between your mother and mine, seeing that Kausalya lives only in me and for me.' Hot tears rained down his cheeks; his eyes were red with weeping and he remained silent for a while lost in painful thought. And this is all the message that Rama sent thro' me.

" Unlike Rama, Lakshmana is not a good hand at concealing the workings of his heart. So he sighed fast and furiously and cried 'What fault, what crime did Dasaratha bring home to Rama that he has condemned him to a cruel exile? I would just like to know it. On his head and eyes were the commands of the despicable Kaikeyi; in obedience to which he perpetrated this horrible injustice and doomed us all to unknown misery and trouble. I care not whether he did so out of a desire to secure the crown to Bharata; take it any way you like, I assert that it is injustice, rank injustice and wanton. Why, he never specified to Kaikeyi what boons he would grant her; there was no mention, not the slightest, of Rama's exile to the forest or Bharata's being crowned instead. Common sense would have him remember that he had promised Rama before the assembled multitudes to crown him king, and might have refused

Kaikeyi when she asked him subsequently to crown her son king and send Rama out of the kingdom. The Smritis proclaim in no doubtful voice that one should not exile his eldest son to the forest; one should not set aside his eldest son; one should not disinherit his only son. I racked my memory as well as I could but failed to find even the shadow of an excuse to banish Rama to the forest. If he has done anything to deserve such a punishment, it is well and agreeable to the Sastras; but you cannot, by any stretch of imagination, come upon it. So Dasaratha must have been guided solely by his whims and caprices; or he must have defied the holy Books and ordinances, blinded thro' omnipotent Fate. I would like to know how it is to be reconciled with his present grief and repentence. 'Tis verily because he has allowed his reason to go astray and has done this without deep counsel that his heart is torn with contrition. Do you blame me for thus speaking ill of him that bore me? The Sastras stand thus: 'Punishment stern and inexorable is the portion of him who is intoxicated with pride and strays from the path of justice and right, be he your father or your guru.' So I no longer regard his majesty Dasaratha as my sire; Rama is my brother; Rama is my protector; Rama is my kith and kin; Rama is my fathêr. Question me not why I renounce my natural father and adopt another whose claims are not so strong and binding. Rama is dear to the hearts of all beings; Rama ever seeks the utmost good nnd happiness of all beings. And Dasaratha, inasmuch he banished Rama to the frightful forests, has rendered himself hateful to all beings; he has unconsciously sought their destruction. Who could ever love him or approve of his acts except such despicable and black-hearted creatures as Kaikeyi

and her precious son Bharata? Dasaratha had the heart and the audacity to condemn to a cruel exile Rama, the soul of virtue and the source of joy and comfort to all his subjects. He has thereby courted the enmity of all beings; how then can he hope to deserve the name of a king, which connotes 'one who brings happiness and delight to the hearts of his subjects' And this is what your son Lakshmana wanted me to convey to you.

"He was unable to put up with the misery that had befaken Rama, and spoke out bluntly and manfully the thoughts that rankled in his heart. But Seeta acted not so. The daughter of Janaka is far-famed for her excellent qualities of head and heart and no less for her practice of all domestic and social virtues. Of unfathomable purpose and resolve, her deep sights were the only index of her grief; and she stood gazing at vacancy, as if possessed. A stranger to anything in the shape of grief or want, the sight of her lord and husband, in the grip of adversity opened the flood-gates of her heart. And she had no news for me. With a wan and pinched face, she looked at Rama through fast-falling tears and at me who was preparing to return to Ayodhya, no doubt saying to herself 'Alas! How could my lord manage to walk through these thorny jungles deprived of his conveyance'. My last recollections of them were Rama standing with folded palms, trying his best manfully to keep back the rebellious tears; Lakshmana attending upon him with fond solicitude; and Seeta weeping piteously and casting furtive glances at myself and the chariot."

CHAPTER LIX.

REPENTANCE OF DASARATHA.

"WHEN I turned my chariot towards Ayodhya, the horses yoked thereto shed tears of unutterable grief and said to themselves 'We congratulated ourselves too fondly that we had secured, through the merit laid up in former births, the opportunity to serve the Lord—far beyond the reach of Brahma and the other high gods. Alas! envious Fate has dashed the cup from our lips. Life holds for us nothing pleasant or desirable. Vain, utterly vain has been this life of ours!' And thus a prey to consuming sorrow, they would not consent to come away from Rama, even though I, the stony-hearted wretch, could bring myself to perpetrate that horror. I had a very hard time of it dragging them to Ayodhya every moment against their will. I survived that stroke of misfortune, took reverent leave of Rama and Lakshmana and turned my face towards this city. But I had a sneaking hope and desire that Rama might relent and perhaps send for me again. In that hope I stayed with Guha, the dear friend of Rama, for three days; and my grief bit me not so deep.

"Your all-mastering desire to please Kaikeyi and the heedless act you were led into in consequence have plunged the whole world in grief and misery. Rama is, as you well know, the soul and Inner Ruler, as it were of all beings in the universe; naturally trees, plants, creepers, flowers, fruits, leaves and shoots have dried up and withered by the scorching fire of grief that consumes them; for have they not their life in Rama? The cool pellucid waters of the rivers, lakes and pools

is now scalding to the touch. The hardy forest trees that look not to man's kind efforts to water them, dry up and wither as readily as the delicate trees and plants so carefully nurtured in groves and gardens by the fostering care of man. Birds and beasts sit dazed and move not. The fierce animals of prey, ever restless, are now sunk in hopeless torpor. The forest haunts wear a stillness of death and the millions that inhabit it are speechless with woe. The petals of the lotus shrink and drown themselves beneath the waters. Pure streams and water-courses run muddy and discoloured. The flowers in the lotus-pools are scorched and shrivelled. The fish below and the fowl above lie motionless with grief. The flowers that grow on land and water are dull of color and devoid of perfume. Sweet fruits turn insipid and repulsive. Gardens, walks and pleasaunces are now deserted and still; birds lie in their nests in dead faint. Groves and gardens have lost their cheerful attractive look. No one evinces any joy or delight when I enter Ayodhya. They find Rama's place in my chariot empty and heave hot sights and frequent like a furnace. Tears course down their cheeks ever and they stir not from the royal abodes and public walks. From storied palaces and turreted mansions, noble ladies observe me driving back the royal chariot empty of Rama, start in affright, cry 'Ha! Alas,!' gaze at one another blankly and burst into tears. Your friends at Ayodhya are in no way distinguished from strangers or enemies; I see no difference in the measure of their grief of separation from Rama. A people melancholy and joyless, elephants and horses weak and faint from grief and misery, wails, laments, groans, sobs and sighs paining your ears at every turn—this fated Ayodhya, that quivers with the agony of her unendurable torment,

resembles in many respects lady Kausalya here, on whom lies heavy the misery and misfortune of having been deprived her world-honoured son." And as Sumantra, through a storm of tears and sobs, proceeded to describe the harrowing fate of all beings, Dasaratha, impelled by his guilty conscience, said to himself "Verily, this Sumantra has answered my queries but too well. I have got more than I wanted, more than I bargained for. One could see with half an eye how he points out to me as the author of all this ruin and evil." He silently acquiesced in it and replied "Sumantra! Kaikeyi basely deceived me, got me to promise her boons, and when I least expected it, put the screw upon me to fulfil them. What could I do? She is an adept in wickedness and comes of a race grown grey in sin. So it was that I, in utter folly, took no counsel with friends, ministers or citizens and, on the spur of the moment, perpetrated this horrible iniquity, driven to it by the wiles of a woman, and to win a smile of her fickle false lips. This great grief has befallen, without any apparent reason, this fair line of Ikshwaku; and I naturally infer from it that the time is near when it will be extinguished under the weight of the accumulated sins of its past. Sumantra! if you remember any kindness I have shown you in the long past, prove your gratefulness by taking me as quickly as you can to where Rama is at present. My life-breaths threaten to escape this tortured frame that hardly holds them back. Sunk as I am in the depths of woe, my rule and power is yet undiminished; and I lay on you my commands to start at once and bring back Rama to my side. For I feel I cannot live without him even for a muhoorta. If my boy has travelled far by this time, take me to where he is and let me draw life and light from

his countenance. Alas! What have I, on whom already fall the shadows of death, what have I in common with the noble hero, whose even row of beautiful teeth shame the buds of the Kunda? A desperate sinner I, what hope for me to be so blessed as to catch a sight of him? Let me but look once again at Rama and Seeta and I am sure to bid defiance to death. I am hurried, all unwillingly, into the jaws of the monster and can keep my self back only by having a sight of the fair face of Rama, lighted up by his beautiful eyes and lovely ears adorned with costly gems. What greater misery for me than to depart from this life without being able to see Rama, the glory of the line of Ikshwaku! Ha! Rama! Lakshmana! Janaki! What dire misery have I brought upon you! I have you all, but have lost you all practically, in that you see me not, torn from this life by the fangs of the poignant grief at being separated from you." And like wax in the midst of a hot furnace, his grief melted his heart and drowned him in the depths of woe. "A vast ocean it is for me to be torn from the side of Rama; its shores are my last look of Seeta; the deep sighs that tear at my heart are its fathomless eddies; my fast-falling tears are the foam on its waves; my tossing to and fro in restlessness and pain are the huge fish that cleave its waters; the unceasing wails and laments on all sides are the thunder of its billow; my aged locks that lie dishevelled in dirt and dust are the moss and fungus on its surface; Kaikeyi, the fiend, is the quenchless fire Badava; my tears are the inexhaustible source wherefrom it flows unceasingly; the insidious counsels of the black-hearted Manthara are the huge monsters of the deep; the boons that Kaikeyi got out of me are the waves that threaten to reach the heavens; my heartless exile of the god-like Rama

aptly represents the extent of it. Whelmed in this fathomless gulf of sorrow, how can I hope to cross it safe without Rama? I implore and entreat to be allowed to see Rama and Lakshmana, but ah me! I am fated to die with the cry upon my lips. Need I any worse omens of the fate that awaits me?" So raved he in may a wise and toppled from his seat in a dead faint. Kausalya observed that he wept and raved more piteously than ever and her heart was filled with a mighty fear of what terrible fate might befall her husband, even as her mother's heart was tortured to think what cruel dangers lay in wait for Rama in the dark forests.

CHAPTER LX.

SUMANTRA CONSOLES KAUSALYA.

LIKE one possessed of an evil spirit, Kausalya sat on the bare ground, trembling all over, faint and pale as one whose life-breaths were escaping. All at once she turned to Sumantra and cried "Turn the heads of the horses towards the forests and take me on the wings of speed to where Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta abide. I cannot, do what I may, live away from them for a moment. Lead me, I pray you, to the dark wilds of Dandaka. If I see them not, I am sure to make the journey to the realms of Death." She broke off, choked with tears. Then the aged councillor, bent towards her all respectfully and said. "Lady! Cast away from you every thought of grief at being parted from Rama. Far be it from you to entertain any anxiety about how Rama would fare, what miseries he might undergo. Let not your sorrow waste away your life and limbs. It is all unmeet for you to lament so when your

god-like son is a hundred times more happy in his forest home than you ever saw him at Ayodhya; regret and repentance, sorrow or grief are utter strangers to his heart. Lakshmana is well conversant with the inner mysteries of Dharma; hence he serves at the feet of Rama with restrained senses, at all times and in all places; and verily his reward is something beyond the power of speech or thought. It is but a dreary forest where Seeta dwells, devoid of any human habitation; yet she abides there as happily and fearlessly as in her palace at Ayodhya; her thoughts, her words, her acts, her life itself are centred ever in Rama. The rough forest life causes her no shade of anxiety; any one would swear that the forest was her only home and that she was born and made to live in it. She roams as fearlessly among the haunts of cruel and fierce beasts as she used to do at Ayodhyà in the pleasant gardens thereabouts. Her whole self is centred in her lord and husband; and her face, fair as the moon in her full, is never darkened by any cloud of care or sorrow. Her heart is ever absorbed in Rama; her life-breaths rooted deep in Rama; devoid of Rama, the fair Ayodhya is a howling wilderness to her; with him, the trackless wastes are fairer and more happy than Ayodhya. On their way she ever and anon stops to inquire of Rama and Lakshmana about the hamlets, villages, towns, trees, rivers and their currents. Forest life seems to her as happy as a holiday in the gardens near Ayodhya. The child made a very wonderful remark in connexion with Kaikeyi." He suddenly checked himself. "What an old fool I am! Were I to give out the very severe words that Seeta used about Kaikeyi when the party left Ayodhya behind them, it would delight the heart of Kausalya. So thought I in my stupidity. But, this

aged king and his wife would, of a truth, give up their ghosts if they were to hear it. I will manage to change the subject anyhow." He pretended to recollect hard some very important thing that eluded him as cleverly. "It is a very curious remark. Stay, let me compel my treacherous memory to restore it. What a pity! This cursed old age has taken advantage of the sight of your grief to rob my memory clean of it." He changed the subject and discoursed of such things as would soothe and console Kausalya. "Believe me when I say that Seeta's beauty and radiance is but heightened by her long walks, by her free exposure to wind and weather and by the sight of the wild beasts and birds of the forest. Like a full-blown lotus or the lovely moon in her golden orb, her face loses not in the least it natural grace or lustre. And then, the sweet honeyed speech of hers! Her shapely feet that erstwhile were adorned with the juice of red cotton, are none the worse for it; they are of a lovelier shade of colour even like the tiny lotus-buds, from constant trudging over hill and dale. You never see her without her ornaments, so great is her love for them. It is a real treat to watch her graceful walk along the rough thorny ways, her golden anklets chiming melodiously as she glides along. She clasps her hand in that of Rama and never shows the least fear at the sight of a lion or a tiger or an elephant. So, there is not the slightest reason to grieve on their account. The story of how Rama carried out the behests of his sire will live among men as long as the sun, the moon and the stars course on their paths. Without the slightest trace of regret or sorrow or repentance, they walk in the path of the hermit and anchorite; they feast delightfully on rare and curious fruits, roots and other woodland fare; their hearts, their

souls are ever centred in carrying out the commands of his majesty as best as the could." Sumantra, with his wisdom and experience of ages, tried his best to console Kausalya and change the sorrowful current of her thoughts, but she would not be comforted and ceased not her cry 'Ha, Rama! darling of my heart! Ha, flower of the line of Raghu!'

CHAPTER LXI.

KAUSALYA REBUKES DASARATHA.

WHEN she was assured beyond a doubt that Rama, the soul of righteousness and the giver of delight to all beings, had really betaken himself to the dreadful forests, Kausalya could scarce keep back her sorrow and anger. She turned upon poor Dasaratha and cried "Lord of men! The three worlds resound with your praise as 'the soul of compassion. He has ever a smile and a pleasant word for all, high or low'. Well, how do you reconcile it with the horrible suffering you have wantonly and in cold blood inflicted upon your sons and Seeta, now dragging their weary limbs along the rough and thorny forest ways? What possessed you to perpetrate this act of eternal infamy?

"I care not if the three worlds acclaim you as the stern votary of truth, who kept his plighted word and shrank not from the dreadful sacrifice of having to banish to the frightful woods the son of his heart, that was vouchsafed to him in his old age, after countless years of vows, fasts, penances, sacrifices and stern austerities, and *that* at the moment of his coronation as heir-apparent. My Rama is a very fountain of mercy, the soul of compassion; never word crossed his lips that

would cause any the slightest pain to another. I care not if the world sings high his praise as having sacrificed the crown so readily at your lightest word, lacking the courage to say 'I have no idea of renouncing the crown after you have promised it to me before the countless millions of your subjects'. What is that to me? How does it stay my grief? What balm does it spread over my lacerated heart? How does it fill the dread void in myself, from whose arms you have torn all mercilessly the only child of my old age? Now, Seeta has but just entered the period of her youth; brought up in the lap of luxury and ease, made for a life of comfort and happiness, how could she stand the sun and rain, wind and weather, hail and snow of the rude forests? Accustomed to be served with curious and delicate dainties of food, comfits, and meats by celebrated *chefs*, how could the high-born princess feed upon forest grain and such rude woodland fare? Ever roused from her slumbers by delicious strains of vocal and instrumental music, how could she bring herself to sleep, her ears pained and horrified by the terrible roars, cries and howls of lions, tigers, elephants and other cruel beasts of the forests? Alas! I know not where my Rama has flung his weary limbs with his shapely arms for a pillow—Rama as stately and graceful as the rainbow, Rama, the flower of valour, with long arms that reach below his knees, hard and strong as iron bolts. Bright as the lotus, rendered brighter yet with his eyes that put to shame the delicate petals of the lotus, redolent with the fragrance of his breath sweeter than that of the lotus, his dark curls half-revealing his broad and noble forehead—is it given to me to behold his fair face but once again? I see him not; yet my life-breaths course in my body; my heart shatters itself not

into a thousand pieces. It needs no prophet to assure me that it is made of the hardest adamant. What crueller act, what more fiendish scheme can any one devise than your systematic and ceaseless persecution and exile of every one that is in the least related to me ?

"Fear not that Bharata might lose his kingdom when Rama comes back to Ayodhya at the end of fourteen years. Rama is not so base as to accept at his hands the kingdom that had been Bharata's for so many years. We see in ordinary life people who set about to perform the Sraddha rites in honor of the departed ancestors, carefully avoid Brahmanas grown grey with age, wisdom and virtue, though they are to be had for the mere asking, and choose their own kinsmen or dependents that they might benefit by the fees and presents accrueing therefrom. Later on, after the Sraddha is over, they invite the good and worthy Brahmanas to dine with them. Do you think they would ever dream of going there, even if the food placed before them was the amrita of the Gods ? Say not 'It is not food polluted by Soodras, but the remains of what has fed holy Brahmanas'. The deliberate insult offered them cannot be wiped out by any such honor or show of it. A noble bull and high bred, would it stoop to eat of the grass that has fed another ? Rama is entitled to sit on your throne after you as the first-born of your loins and as incontestibly superior in all human and royal excellences; now, Bharata, younger in years and in merit, has it; and would Rama take it back from him after fourteen years of unbounded rule and power ? You have been the emperor and ruler of this broad earth for ever so many thousands of years. Know you not the right and wrong of it ? Have you

ever seen a tiger even wasting a glance at the flesh that wolves and jackals have eaten of? Would Rama ever dream of this your kingdom after another had his fill of it? Offerings cooked or burnt, the sacred grass Kusa and the sacrificial posts are useless for any religious purpose after they have been once used. No one cares to drink of a cup where another has left for him but the lees. No one cares to accept the doubtful merits of a yaga from another who had drunk of the soma juice offered in it. Even so, Rama would not even care to listen to any talk of this your kingdom that you have given to Bharata to enjoy. A royal tiger suffers not another of his species even to smell the tip of its tail; even so Rama would be the last person to sit quietly under this insult.

"Shelter not yourself under the excuse 'What can I do? Rama has chosen to be deprived of what was his by right. He is a coward and a weakling. His very impotence has driven him to seek safety and shelter in the forest. He banished himself, not I". Nay, not so; the banded might of the fourteen worlds above and below are powerless to gaze at him when the spirit of war is upon him. Do you want to know why he has elected to efface himself? He always seeks to make others walk in the path of right and duty by example and precept. He would not go back upon his plighted word and seek to possess himself of this kingdom by violence. Of unfathomable strength and valour, should he choose to shoot his gold-bound arrows at the world, it is but child's play to him to consume to nothing the seven oceans, the lordly mountains and the majestic rivers, even as the Spirit of time reduces to nothing the great elements when the long Age of Brahma comes to a close. Strong with the

strength of maddened lions, with eyes large and lustrous as those of a bull, the first and best of men, his might and valour are utterly beyond speech and thought.

"We see fish prey upon its spawn; and you have chosen to imitate it by sending to a sure death, your first-born and best. No one would say you nay, if your exile of your righteous son is the Dharma lived by the brahmanas, kshatriyas and vaisyas, if it is in accordance with the dictates of the sastras, if it is sanctified by age and wisdom. But stretch my intellect and imagination as far as I may, I see not that it comes under any class or kind of Dharma.

"Manu lays it down that a woman knows no other refuge, no other shelter but her wedded lord; in his absence, the son is her sole refuge; if it is not to be had, her duty devolves upon her parents and kin; she should look for help and protection to no other. Now, the father watches over her welfare and happiness during her childhood, the husband during her youth, and the son in her old age; hence a woman is never left to herself. Here you are under the thumb of Kaikeyi, my co-wife and rival; you are as good as lost to me. My only son has been buried by you in the forest; he is as good as lost to me. My kith aud kin are far away; I might not go to them when my husband is alive. So, you have ruined me on every side beyond hope of remedy. I care not if I am the only person involved; but you have ruined this fair realm of Kosala; you have ruined the countries where rule those in any way connected with you; you have ruined myself and my child; you have ruined this Ayodhya and the people that live in it; you have ruined your ministers and well-wishers; and last, you have ruined yourself. Now, what have you to show in return for this heavy load of sin you have

heaped upon yourself ? Whom have you pleased thereby? I hope that at least your dear wife Kaikeyi and Bharata the darling of your heart are satisfied. Is it not enough if their hearts are gladdened? What care you how the world goes ? What care you whose hearts break ? After me the deluge." Thus did Kausalya strike with cruel and venomed words at the bleeding heart of Dasaratha, who fainted away, unable to bear the shock. And with darkening consciousness, he said to himself ' What sin, what heinous sin have I committed in my past, to draw upon myself such a terrible retribution?"

CHAPTER LXII.

" LORD ! I AM LOST."

KAUSALYA, the mother of Rama, spoke out of an angry and sorrow-laden heart. Her harsh speech offended not Dasaratha who said to himself, " It is but truth she speaks. I lent weak ears to the fiendish Kaikeyi and wrought a sin unparalleled in the history of Creation. I am damned beyond all hope.' He lost his hold over his senses and mind; and after a long interval of blank stupor, he was dragged back to life and its sufferings. Kausalya stood by him; his thoughts turned upon her and he said to himself " The Books tell us that our acts, good or evil, put forth their fruit even in this life, if the driving force behind them be but intense enough; and so, my darling son is torn from me and I suffer indescribable tortures thereby. Let me try to remember any crime or iniquity in my past births that I now expiate so horribly." Then there flashed across his brain the memory of a dark sin he had been guilty of in the far past, when, all innocently, he

slew the fair son of a hermit by the shaft known as Sabdavedhi; the painful recollections gave the finishing blow to the poor old man who was already staggering under the shock of separation from Rama.

He fainted away once more; anon he sat up trembling all over with a new-born fear and with bowed head and clasped hands of humility he turned to Kausalya and said "Behold, I entreat you in all repentance. Pray grant me your forgiveness. I know you of old as returning the wrongs and hate of otherswith kindness and love a thousand-fold; I have heard it said that to the faithful wife and true, her husband is a living god, be he angelic in disposition or otherwise. Your heart is ever wedded to Dharma. It is not unknown to you the ups and downs of life, the play of circumstances and surroundings that make all the difference between man and man. No one can deny that you are crushed under the load of that greatest grief that could ever befall a human being. But, see you not that I am almost demented with a like grief? Does it become *you* to speak to me these words, so cruel of import?" And the mighty emperor, in whose smile or frown lay the life and death of countless millions, entreated her as any meanest suppliant in accents of contrition and humility that would melt a heart of adamant. It was too much for Kausalya; the flood-gates of her heart were opened and the tears rained from her eyes as the water-courses during the heavy winter rains.

She seized the joined palms of Dasaratha, placed them reverently on her head and cried "Alas! To what dreadful sin has my anger driven me!" Mighty fear gripped her heart and shaking all over like a withered leaf, she exclaimed: "Lord! I throw myself at your feet, a miserable sinner and pray you to forgive

me and extend your sweet compassion unto me. I am lost, I am damned beyond all hope, the very moment when you entreated me with joined palms; and why seek to pierce a dead heart with these terrible words? A woman but invites her utter annihilation here and hereafter, whose husband, wise and famous, entreats her with clasped hands. I am not so utterly lost to all sense of right and justice. Know I not that Dharma has no mysteries for you, that Truth was ever your beacon in life? Pardon me the ravings of a woman driven to madness by the loss of her son. Grief robs us of our fortitude; grief makes short work of what we have learnt and heard; grief is the sure destroyer of everything we hold dear and precious; grief is our most relentless foe. We can stand the shock of a sudden attack from our visible enemy; but we are all powerless under the stroke of grief, be it ever so light. It is five days to-day since Rama left me here to go to the forests, left me a prey to cruel grief; and it seems to me five milleniums. My grief grows upon what it feeds. Have you not seen the cruel ocean roar all the more fearfully, for the rivers of the world pouring into it their volumes of water?" And upon Kausalya repenting thus fell the shades of night. Dasaratha was somewhat consoled by her words and sank into a deep slumber, overpowered by various and conflicting emotions.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE CRIME OF DASARATHA.

THEN a muhoorta later, Dasaratha awoke and was straightway caught by his sleepless foe—Grief. It absorbed him quite, like the bright sun slowly

sucked in by the maws of the evil-faced Rahu, ever since the fatal moment when he drove the god-like Rama and Lakshmana to dread exile. It was the sixth day of his bereavement; and black Night was fast coursing towards the confines of her realm to hand over her sceptre to her bright successor. Dasaratha dragged forth into light from the dark closets of his memory, the dread crime he had committed in the years that were dead and addressing Kausalya all gently, said, "Dear! I take it that your anger against me has abated somewhat of its fury. Hence, I make bold to tell you this. Every one in this mortal world reaps what he saws, good or evil, inexorably, unerringly. It is a fool that stops not to inquire before he begins anything, if the results thereof be light or heavy, if the chances are in his favour or against. It is a fool who sacrifices much to gain a little; his brother is he who sets his hand to that from which no good accrues. It is the mark of a wise man to sacrifice a little and gain much; he savours of prudence who sets his hand only to that which brings him good. I dyed my soul black with the heinous sin of exiling Rama to the woods to gain a worthless trifle—to bring a smile to the lips of Kaikeyi. The wide world holds not another fool to stand by my side.

" There was once a lovely garden and in it a palasa tree in the midst of a grove of sweet mango. Nature bethought herself one fine day to put on her flowered robe; and the palasa was almost invisible behind its bright garment of blood-red flowers. The mangoes put on *their* holiday garb, but it was dull and unlovely. The gardener came in and glanced at his trees. A wise man he was in truth, for, long experience had made him sage! 'My palasa' said he 'gives bright promise of a brighter

future; flowers so lovely are but the pioneers of lovelier fruits. Lo! yon mangoes with their sombre peasant garb do but index faithfully the dull insipid fruit they are to bear. Now, who but a fool would waste his time and labour on these mangoes that are a sorry foil to the fair palasa?' He, in his sapience, uprooted the mangoes, one and all and devoted his time and labour to the rearing of his favourite palasa. Another day Nature choose to put on her garb of ripe luscious fruit. The man of wisdom went forth into his garden, where stood his palasa with ugly ungainly fruit; its gaudy tinsel garb of flowers had been stripped off its back by the inexorable seasons. He glanced at his neighbour's garden, whom he scarce deigned to remember as a fool and idiot. It was barely visible for the mango trees that studded it, bending low with the weight of their golden fruits, and the swarms of bees that clustered about them to drink of the honey-sweet juice that flowed therefrom. Verily, none would like to change places with the fool in his disappointment and sorrow. Hence, I say to you that he who sets his hand to anything without deep enquiry into the possibilities thereof, would have to gather in a harvest of sorrow and disappointment, like the ninny that reared up with infinite care his favourite palasa. I am that double-distilled idiot who uprooted the precious mangoes and gave myself up to the rearing of the palasa. I watched with infinite care and solicitude over Rama's infancy, childhood and manhood, but when the moment came for my efforts to bear fruit, I drove him away from the kingdom. There can be no surer sign of my folly than my useless grieving when it is too late. I could scarce believe that it was this very same Dasaratha who deemed it a trifle to solemnly promise to crown Rama as heir-apparent and forswear

himself before the day was dead, who steeled his father's heart against love or pity, the better to consign his first-born and best to the cruel forests. And all this for what?—to win the love of fickle false-hearted Kaikeyi who loved him not.

"In the bright morn of my life, when I was perfecting myself in the arts and accomplishments that become the future ruler of a kingdom, I was considered to be the master of Sabdavedhana (a mystery of the science of the Bow, which consists in shooting down birds and beasts beyond ken, guiding oneself solely by the sounds they make). Pride and conceit filled my heart to the brim; and blinded thereby, I perpetrated a deadly sin. Like a child that, in its innocence, drinks off the poisoned cup and writhes in agony, I am doomed to pay with my life the folly of my youth. As a rule, one's crop of karma, good or bad, is gathered in future births or other worlds; but my sin was unspeakably horrible. The driving force behind it made it bear fruit in this very life. Like the fool who, deceived by the bright beauty of the palasa flowers, revels in imagination in a future harvest of golden nectarine fruits to match, I mastered the mystery of Sabdavedhana and was blinded by the praise and fame lavished upon me thereby; but I heeded not the sin and the sorrow, the infamy and grief that lay in wait for me all pitilessly.

"Long before I sought your hand in marriage, when I was the heir-apparent, the changing year brought round the winter rains. Men's blood begins then to course in hot lava streams through their veins, love and passion fanning them to a white heat. The sun drinks up the essence of the earth, scorches the world with his rays and wanders off towards the south. Then, heat takes to itself a holiday and disappears. Clouds dark

as night come out of their caves, and gladden the hearts of frogs, chatakas and peacocks. Drenched with the showers and pelted with the arrowy drops, birds grope their way to the tops of trees heavy-laden with rain. The lofty mountains haunted by elephants in rut are entirely hidden beneath the ceaseless downpour and present the appearance of a waveless ocean. The mountain torrents flow pure and unstained for some distance from their source; later on they turn red as they run through the earth rich in ore of varied hue, like speckled serpents running through the ashes of a forest conflagration. At that time I went out a hunting in my chariot along the banks of the Sarayu. I lay concealed a long while with senses on the alert, hoping by night to kill some buffalo, elephant or tiger that came to drink at the river's brink. In the stillness of the night, a sound fell upon my ears as of an elephant drawing water up his trunk. It was pitch-dark, so that you cannot see your hand a foot off; in truth, it was the sound of some one immersing a pitcher in the water. My heart beat with joy at the thought of bagging, at the outset, a mighty elephant; and I sped a sharp and cruel arrow, like the hooded messenger of death, to where the sound proceeded from. The new day was fast approaching. All at once, a cry pierced my ears, the cry of a hermit who, struck to the heart by my shaft, fell down exclaiming 'Ah me! I am done for'. My victim continued to moan and wail in his agony 'Alas! I am a poor innocent hermit. Never have I harmed any creature. I have no enemy in the world, not one. I came to this lonely spot to draw water, confident that no man or beast would frequent it. Who has shot this deadly shaft? I do not recall any wrong I have done to others. I am a nameless anchorite who had long

ago left behind me any harm or injury to others, in thought, word or deed. I but feed upon fruits and roots and other woodland fare that I could get here and observe stern austerities. What have I done to die such a miserable death! What will my slayer gain by my death, a poor thing clad in bark and skins? Again, I ask myself whom I have offeneded. Verily, who would praise this cruel deed that bears no fruit but an evil one? As well applaud the impious wretch who dares to violate his Guru's wife. Not that I grieve to quit this frail body; but my poor parents, old, blind and helpless—alas! what would become of them! Long years have I tended them, an only son. They would not survive me. What devil in human shape thus conspired to kill us all, father, mother and son by a single shaft? Yet he is no better than a veritable fool and the slave of his passions, that has perpetrated this foul iniquity.'

"Stern allegiance to Dharma was ever the key-note of my life. When those heart-rending words smote my ears, my bow and arrows dropped from my hand. Grief and fear, dark and terrible, enveloped my senses and mind, and crushed them in their deadly grip. My feet were unconsciously drawn to the place whence these sounds proceded, my heart sinking low at every step. A cruel sight met me there. A young hermit lay on the ground writhing in mortal agony, his heart pierced with my shaft, his matted hair tossing hither and thither, while he flung his pitcher away from him and sought to escape from the dreadful pain that racked his limbs. His wasted frame was covered with blood and dust. After a while his eyes fell upon me shaking with terror and staring at him blankly like one possessed; he darted a glance of fire that might have reduced

me to ashes on the spot and cried in a terrible voice "Protector of men! A poor hermit I, a solitary ranger of the woods, what harm had you at my hands that you should pierce me with your venomed shafts? Why have you struck me down, who but came here to draw water for my aged parents? May be it is sport to you to bring me down with a single arrow; but, know you that you have sent to their death my father and mother too, hoary with age, blind and helpless. They are expecting me every moment, poor souls! I know not how long they would bear the pangs of cruel thirst. How have they stood me in good stead, my wide and profound study of the holy Books, my ceaseless and stern austerities. Alas! My father is not aware of my lying low here, done to death by you cruel king. Vain hope! Feeble, tottering with age, what can he do, knowing? A proud tree, riven to pieces by the merciless strokes of a storm, what succour can it expect from its life-long neighbor? Dasaratha! Be it your penance to take this terrible news to my father; else he will send you to perdition, as surely as a forest conflagration consumes the dry and withered trees it feeds on. His hermitage is hard by. Take refuge in his mercy that he may not launch his curses at you. This sharp-toothed barb has sheathed itself in my heart and causes me intolerable agony, even as an angry current that brings down the sandy hillocks that bar its way. Do me a favor by drawing it out, ere you go."

He marked my hesitation; for, to disobey him was to prolong his torment; to obey him would wrench his life out of his body; and his death would at once invest me with the hideous cloak of Brahmanicide. He saw Death beckoning to him and turned himself to me with a painful effort. "Dasaratha, do not give way to purposeless grief; call up your fortitude to your help. You

need not apprehend the cruel fate that awaits the slayer of a Brahmana. My father is a Vaisya and my mother a Soodra.' And with his senses all unhinged, he writhed on the ground in fearful agony. Then I plucked out the fatal shaft. He stared at me with dumb terror in his eyes and quitted this life. There he lay, drenched with gore and water, his heart yet palpitating with the frightful torment he passed through; and I wept aloud in nameless grief.

CHAPTER LXIV.

DASARATHA PASSES AWAY.

MY dark sin, begot of ignorance, gripped my soul and sent my senses adrift. To inform the miserable parents or not was the supreme question of the moment. Everything urged me to face the situation boldly. I filled the pitcher and took my way to the hermitage as directed by my victim. There sat the bereaved parents, aged, infirm, helpless and all unable to move about, like birds shorn of their wings. They were talking of their son and wondered at his long absence. They eagerly expected him every moment, but they knew not I had blasted their hopes for ever. Fear and grief choked my utterance and I stood there like one dazed.

The father was quick to catch the sound of my footsteps and cried "Darling! Why delay? Hand us the water. May be you were playing on the river banks; your mother is dying with anxiety; come in. I am sure you will not bear in mind anything that we might have done to offend you, consciously or otherwise. Know you not that you are a hermit, all

stern and inexorable to himself, but soft and compassionate to others? We are blind, but we see thro' you. Our life-breaths are faint, but we live thro' you. Why so silent?" Terror choked my reply; but I mastered it with a mighty effort; my stern self-control and discipline as a scion of warrior-kings served me well and I replied "I am a kshatriya, Dasaratha by name. It is not given to me to call myself the son of such great-souled ones. A dark sin of my far-off past bore fruit now and guided my hand to commit a horrible crime, condemned by the good. I came to hunt on the banks of the Sarayu and lay concealed to shoot the beasts that came to drink of its waters at night. A sound, as of an elephant drawing up water through his trunk, reached my ears and I let fly a shaft, guiding myself by the direction of the sound. All at once an agonised cry pierced my ears and I flew to the spot but to find a hermit youth transfixed with my arrow and writhing in the grip of death. I aimed my arrow at what I took to be an elephant, but I brought death to your son. I went up to him and drew out the fatal barb, whereupon his life-breaths quitted the body. He rose to the Mansions of the Blessed exclaiming 'Alas! My poor old parents! What will become of them, blind and helpless, now that I am taken from them?' His last thoughts and words clung to you. This is what I have done; I slew your son, but all unknowingly. I throw myself upon your mercy.

"The old hermit and his wife almost fainted away from uncontrollable grief. My cruel words pierced their hearts, deep, very deep. He turned his eyes upon me where I stood before him palm upon palm and cried "Had you done this dark deed of shame and sin and yet refrained from being the messenger of your own crime, your

head had split in a thousand pieces thro' my dread curse. A warrior born, that spills all wantonly a hermit's blood, is sure to be hurled down from his high estate, be he the king of the celestials. He whose shaft strikes a knower of Brahman absorbed in meditation, has his head split in seven. But your brain planned not the crime your hand has committed. Repentance dire and full has begun yonr punishment already. It is no light thing for you to muster up courage to bear the dread news of your own guilt; that explains how you live to tell it; else your glorious line, at whose head stands the mighty Ikshwaku, would, by this time, have been engulfed in the water of oblivion. Why speak of you? Lead us to the spot, for we would even behold our darling son who lies, I ween, stark and cold, drenched with gore."

"I led them there, the unhappy parents. They gently stroked him, their only son, and all at once fell upon him, crushed by overwhelming grief. Their cries and laments were piteous to hear. 'Child! Have you no word for us, no reverent greeting? Why do you affect the cold, dank earth? How have we angered you, darling! Know you not that I am dear to you beyond count? Behold your mother. Turn your eyes upon her; clasp us in fond embrace and let us drink in your words of ambrosial sweetness. Ah! shall I hear in the small hours of the morning your gentle voice chanting the Vedas and the Sastras? The prayers to the Goddess of of evening twilight duly offered, the sacred fires tended, you came to where I sat, lonely and with the shadows of separation from you drawing near, and sought to cheer me by many a word, by many an act. When shall I see another such? I am too weak to go the round of my daily duties; too weak to procure the means of

sustenance for myself and your mother. I have none else in this wide world to look after me; none else even to guide me with my staff. You knew it all and gave me no occasion to remember it, so kindly and so watchfully did you serve me, as if I were an honoured guest, for whom fruits, roots and other woodland fare were all too insufficient. Lo, your mother! tottering with age and infirmity, blind, doting upon you! Grief has deprived her of what little mastery she had over her senses. How shall I maintain her through the long years, myself utterly helpless? My darling! Stay, go not to the dread halls of Death. Wait a while for your old father and mother; to-morrow and we will all journey together. What will become of us in this forest without you or any one else to take care of us? Haste not, we are even now coming with you. We will go up to the throne of Lord Yama and I will look him in the face and say 'King of justice! Pray excuse our son for not presenting himself before you as soon as he received your orders. We have none else to protect us, to take care of us and we pray him back of you.' I am sure the Regent of the South will grant me my wish, lone and helpless.

"Nothing can lead me to conclude that this your untimely death is in expiation of some dark sin in the far past. This wicked wretch has laid you low, a meek white-souled saint. Rise up to the bright worlds on high where abide noble warriors that died for their king, for their God and for their country, with laughing faces turned towards the foe, and all thro' the might of the merit you have laid up, thro' the might of Truth to which I have dedicated myself. Rise up to the Spheres of light where sit in brighter glory such heroic emperors as Sagara, Saibya, Dileepa, Janamejaya, Nahusha and

Dundhumara. Take your place by the side of those wise and great Ones who devote themselves to the study and practice of the Holy Writ; of those who give away, in glad gift, houses, hamlets, villages, countries and kingdoms; of those who unceasingly tend the holy fires; of those whose hearts cleave to their wedded wives, gentle and faithful; of those who give away countless heads of kine on auspicious conjunctions. May you join the ranks of such as ever wait with reverent solicitude on the good and the great. Sit with those who make a resolve to reach the high worlds of glory thro' the observance of such stern vows as the Mahaprasthana and cast off their frail bodies where the Ganga and the Yamuna meet in joyful acclaim or in the holy fire. My long line of stern self-controlled tapasvins counts none who had not a seat in the resplendent halls of light. You are the son of my heart. Your slayer shall drink to the last drop of the cup of misery and torment". They then busied themselves with the funeral obsequies of their son torn from their sides, all untimely, who rose from the funeral pyre in his glorious body of light thro' the merit of hard-won tapas. The Lord of the celestials, came down to the spot and led him away in his vimana to grace the halls of Swarga. The youth turned to his parents before he left the earth, saluted them with reverent affection, and consoled them in many a wise. He then rose from the earth and proceeded thro' the regions of the sky, honored by the denizens thereof. 'All this and more do I owe to the might accruing of my humble and reverent service to you. I will not be long separated from you in my abode on high', were the last words that reached the grief-stricken parents.

"The aged father rendered his son the last offices

and turning to me, who stood trembling by with clasped hands of fear, said "Protector of men! slay me too. Death has no terrors for me, now that you have taken away my only son from me. You deserve to be consumed to ashes for having brought to his death my darling child, pure and stainless; but your heart guided not your hand, and I curse you lightly when I say you will suffer a similar terrible bereavement. You will lose your son before your eyes and your life-breaths will go with him. You, a Kshatriya, spilt the blood of one who had dedicated himself to the service of God and Man; but, all unknowingly you did it and are hence saved from a deadly sin. A gift to a holy Brahmana comes back to the giver in the shape of untold merit; even so, the grief that consumes me shall dog your steps and speed you to the dark realms of Death." Lamenting in this wise, he built a blazing fire, entered it with his aged partner in life and passed on to where his darling son sat on his throne of glory.

"I was racking my brains to find out the cause why this great grief befell me, engendered by the separation from my son; and it flashed upon me, the memory of the great sin I had been guilty of in my youth by shooting the shaft known as Sabdavedhi. An invalid, suffering from a dangerous illness, feeds upon what nourishes his ailments and hastens his death: even so, my dark sin has sought me out. The words of the great One have borne fruit and I go to-day to meet my death. Kausalya! my eyes have lost the power to see you; so have the kindness to touch me; let me feel the pressure of your flower-soft hands." He sobbed aloud, in the grip of a mortal fear. "What can it be, but the marvellous efficay of the hermit's curse—my banishing Rama to the woods, all innocent in thought, word or deed; and

more wonderful still, his cheerful acceptance of the unjust and atrocious punishment I inflicted upon him, urged on to it by the venomed words of cruel Kaikeyi. Else how could I reconcile the even righteous tenor of my life, whose heart was ever wedded to Dharma, with the unholy and iniquitous plot, so basely hatched by myself and my partner in guilt? Again, why should the unparalleled, nay, the partial affection that Kaikeyi had for Rama till now, turn all at once into bitter hatred and malice? Most wonderful of all, why should the noble heart of Rama be utterly free of anger or ill-will towards me, who wronged him so grievously? No sensible person will immure his son in the dark and dreary forests, be he a devil incarnate; and if he did, no angelic son would view it with any other feeling than that of righteous indignation. Oh that Rama touched me once, but once, with his flower-soft hands! Nay, enough if his noble face dawns upon my fading consciousness but once; and I defy death and all his host. They who journey to the halls of Yama, take their last looks of those near and dear to them. Alas! Kausalya, I see you not; my memory reels. The messengers of Death bid me haste. Woe is me that my darkening eyes are not fixed on the divine beauty of my Rama! A more miserable lot can never be mine. The grief of my being denied the company of my darling dries up the springs of life, even as the summer sun drinks up the shallow puddles. Verily, they are gods immortal, not men, to whom it is given to behold the fair face of Rama, fifteen years from this day, radiant as the orb of Night in her golden fulness, the priceless ear-drops heightening, if possible, the sheeny splendour. Eyes lovely as the petals of a full blown lotus; eyebrows darkly pencilled and exquisitely

arched like the bow of Cupid; the even row of his pearly teeth; the finely chiselled nose, that puts to shame the jasmine buds; the noble proportions of his countenance, that lend a charm, by comparison, to the full autumn moon or the blowing lotuses; wafting sweet and delicious fragrance—how blessed are they who would gaze on it, when he returns to Ayodhya from his self-imposed exile, like the Regent of Venus re-entering his sphere! Kausalya! my heart breaks under the crue strokes of grief. My senses contact not the accustomed objects. The rays of the lamp flare up into darkness when the nourshing oil dries up: even so my senses are extinguished, one by one, when my mind reels on its tottering throne. This grief hacks at the threads of my life, poor wretch, half dead! even as a raging flood brings down the undermined banks. Raghava! my prince of heroes! dispeller of my grief! most loving! my refuge! my darling! where are you? Kausalya! life is no more for me. Sumitra! what an awful grief falls on you! Kaikeyi! the dark Fate of Ikshwaku's glorious line! cruel demon! my murderess, who borrowed the shape, of Yama for the while!" Soraved on the dying king, while there stood by him the noble mothers of Rama and Lakshmana. Heart-rending were his laments for the son of his heart whom he was lured to banish to Dandaka. And at the dread hour of midnight, when the dying day brought forth, in pain and travail, her bright- eyed heir to light, the foaming billows of grief bore Dasaratha, the Emperor, on their breasts, on, on towards the dark and gloomy portals of Death; yet, lo! his eyes wore a look of holy calm and joy, as if surprised and awed by the sudden presence of some mighty Being.

CHAPTER LXV.

HIS WIVES' LAMENT.

AT day-dawn, panegyrists skilled in the science of words, and the minstrels with the chronicles of time stored in their capacious memories, gathered without the sleeping apartments of the king and with them musicians expert in auspicious song, and set about to chaunt the praises of Dasaratha. The grand and sonorous sounds echoed through hall and court. There were some among them who could express the complicate evolutions of time with their palms and these sang his glorious deeds to the accompaniment thereof, keeping beautiful time. Thereat, the feathered songsters, free and caged, awoke and discoursed their sweet woodland melody. There were others of the choral band who sang the names of the Almighty, "Hari, Narayana". Some sang the praises of the holy Ones, the sacred places and waters. Some played skilled music on the veena and the other instruments. Some recited benedictory stanzas. Some declaimed poems and epics composed in honour of his majesty. The palace of the monarch echoed these grand and and auspicious sounds.

Then entered to the royal bedchamber such women, eunuchs and other attendants as were skilled in the etiquette of awaking kings. Others there were, experts in the mysteries of the bath, who kept ready in golden ewers, crystal water stained with heavenly sandal and other fragrant substances, as the time and the season would have it and as the sastras have laid it down. Many a servant-maid there was, pure, young and fair, that bore auspicious unguents and essences; the cow and

such other sacred objects to touch; powered mixtures of cocoanut, sesamum and cumin-seed, to gargle after the teeth had been cleaned, to make the breath fragrant and sweet; roots and herbs of mystic potency; the sacred waters of the Ganga and the other sacred streams; holy Tulasi leaves and water that were offered at at the feet of Sri Ranganatha, the household deity of the Ikshwaku line of kings, to clease the soul of every sin and infuse might and right to engage in all good and pious works; mirrors, clothes, ornaments, flowers, garlands and other toilet gear. Every one of the articles kept there for the monarch's use when he awoke to the duties of a new day, was the fairest and the best of its kind. The assembled crowds waited in the antechamber to pay their respects to the king before the sun should rise. But when they saw that his majesty came forth not even after sunrise, vague suspicions crossed their hearts as to what might have befallen their lord.

The royal ladies that slept near the king roused him gently and respectfully with appropriate words and expressions; they touched him; they shook him; but they failed to detect any breath, motion or heat as betokens a sleeping man. They knew very well the usual signs of sleep, light, heavy and profound—the movements of the limbs, the beating of the heart and the deep and regular breathing. They observed him variously and minutely, but could discover none of the above signs of life. Mighty fear then took hold of them; they trembled at the horrible suspicion that forced itself upon their minds that their lord had gone forth from their midst, never to return. They shivered and shook like the slender water-plants that lie in the path of a roaring torrent. Then, the truth was forced upon

now that you have cleared your path of foe or rival. My only son Rama has elected to lead a forest life and has left me behind him to bewail my lot; my husband, my sole refuge, has returned to his seat on high, forgetting that my place is ever by his side. A band of travellers passing thro' a dark forest infested with cruel beasts of prey, leave behind them one of their number. One could very easily prophesy the fate of that unfortunate in the dark and pathless wilds. Even so, I have not long to live. No good wife likes to be away from her lord and husband; but you have nothing in common with such—you, that have deliberately turned your back on every obligation of Dharma. One, who is possessed by the demon of gold and eats of the fruit kakamarda, has he any idea of the dangers that lie in wait for him? You are a living monument of virtue, compassion and altruism—you who, at the whispered counsel of a hunch-back, steeled your heart to lay the axe at the Ikshwaku race, root and branch. Noble woman! you got some undefined boons from his majesty in the far past; when it suited your purpose, you bound him to it by a dreadful and solemn oath; you had not the slightest hesitation to sacrifice Rama and Seeta and consign them to a living death to secure your ends. Were king Janaka to hear of this, would not his father's heart quiver with agony as mine does? My son, they say, is among the living; yet he is dead to me, for I shall see him no more. That noble-minded youth knows not that I am baited by my foes, sonless, widowed, helpless and abandoned by god and man. Alas! how my child Seeta would tremble with fear in the dark woods infested with beasts of prey—she, the beloved daughter of the ruler of Mithila, all unmeet to face the rough winds of privation and adversity, but

now become an object of pity to all. The hideous roars, howls and cries of the night-ranging beasts and birds will drive her, affrighted and trembling, closer to the side of Rama. She was everything to her father, son and daughter all in one. Age has chilled his heart; and the miserable fate that has befallen his darling child would eat into his soul and bring his grey hairs to an early death. A faithful wife and noble has no joy or sorrow apart from her mate; when he happens to be away from her in other lands, other countries, she drags on a miserable existence, hating the very sight of dresses and ornaments; and she does not allow her husband to precede her even by a moment on the path to the seats of glory. My place in life or death is by the side of my lord. I follow him through fire and water and share his home in earth or heaven." Thereupon the attendants of the palace tore her away, all unwilling, from the body of Dasaratha, she wailing all the while most piteously.

Then Vasishtha directed the ministers and the other officers of the palace to preserve the body in a cauldron of oil and proceed with the funeral rites. But the servitors, conversant with the royal usages, traditions and customs, made respectful reply that it was not seemly to render the last offices to a father in the absence of his sons. No impurity can attach to the body from the crematory rites being delayed, its contact with oil being an effective safeguard; and they would take all care of the late tenement of Dasaratha till his sons should arrive to assume charge of it.

His queens stood round the cauldron with streaming eyes and cried with raised hands: "Maharaja! you knew full well that Rama is not here to watch over us— Rama whose feet never stray from the path of Truth,

who has ever a pleasant word and look for every one of us. Yet you had the heart to adandon us thus to the tender mercies of Chance and Adversity! You wretch of a Kaikeyi tore Rama from our side; and now she has added one more to her victims and deprived us of our husband. How could we dare to live in the vicinity of that incarnation of sin and treachery? Rama was ever our shield and sword; Rama was ever devoted in his attentions to you; of unshaken fortitude, he put away from him, with a smile, Power to whom he was about to be wedded and chose to betake himself to the forest in the company of Mahalakshmi. Kaikeyi, invested with brand-new power and wealth, would grow intoxicated and insult and torment us. Without your noble self or that hero to take refuge in, how shall we manage to live, the billows of misery threatening to whelm us every moment? It is nothing for her to seek the ruin of her wedded husband, of Rama, Lakshmana or Seeta; and it is but a step further to send us on the same path."

Dark and gloomy was Ayodhya that day, like a moonless night or a widowed wife. The tears of men flowed unceasingly; noble dames cried aloud in their grief; squares, and public altars at the cross-roads and the private houses of residents had an empty, inauspicious look, slovently, ill-kept. The Lord of men was driven by grief of separation from his son to tread the road to the other world; his wives were laid low by the cruel stroke of sorrow and sought relief in the arms of unconsciousness. The Lord of day was deeply grieved at the death of his glorious descendant and with a wan face, sought the privacy and solitude of his chambers in the west. The afflicted Earth found refuge in the dark embraces of Night.

Some of the royal kinsmen suggested that the cremation should proceed forthwith; "for" said they "Dasaratha has four heroic sons; but it is the hand of Fate that keeps them away from his side, one and all. So, we do ill to delay." But the ministers and councillors would not have it so; they would not take it upon themselves to conduct the funeral obsequies without the presence of at least one of his sons.

Dasaratha, the princes and Seeta away from Ayodhya, it presented a repulsive sight like a sunless firmament or a moonless night and starless, while groups of sad-faced men and women filled its streets and squares, weeping with silent grief. Kaikeyi was the subject of their talk, Kaikeyi the best hated person at that moment in the whole creation. Not a face was relieved by any gleam of comfort or consolation; not a heart but was surcharged with misery.

CHAPTER LXVII.

KINGLESS AYODHYA.

HE age-long night drew to a close and its horrors were heightened by the waves of misery and grief that rolled over the inhabitants of Ayodhya. The God of day took his seat on his throne of light; and it was a sign for the officers of the state and brahmanas to meet in the hall of audience for high debate. Markandeya, Maudgalya, Vamadeve, Kasyapa, Katyayana, Gautama, Jabali the far-famed and other saintly brahmanas and ministers addressed themselves to Vasishtha, the high-priest and said: "The night has passed and it seemed to us would never end. Could it be otherwise when our king has preferred death to

separation from his son? Well, the Maharaja has gone back to his seat on high; Rama roams afar in the wild woods; the glorious Lakshmana never quits his side; Bharata and Satrughna spend happy days at Rajagriha, the home of their grandsire, and the capital of the Kekaya realm. It is imperative that some one of the princes should sit on the throne of Ikshwaku; we betray our trust by abandoning this kingdom to anarchy and destruction.

"Varuna and Indra turn away from a kingless land and send not the welcome showers to cool the burning plains; or at best, hail and snow. No one troubles himself to till the fruitful soil. The son pays no heed to the words of the father; the wife seeks to rule the husband. No one dares to keep with him, things precious or valuable, for fear of thieves or robbers. No one can, at any moment, call his wife his own, for, she might be torn from him by a lawless and mightier kinsman. This is only an earnest of many other horrors and terrors that march towards a kingless land. Trade and commerce, sale and barter, import and export, borrowings and lendings are ever conspicuous by the absence of fair dealing and honesty. Fear of life and property throttles every one's energies and kills in him any desire for united action and counsel for public good. In a land where might is right and violence the order of the day, no one is fool enough to plant gardens or open alms-houses, rest-houses or monasteries. A calm and self restrained brahmana, ruler of his senses, regular in his observances and vows and conducting the prescribed rites and ceremonies that tend towards public and private weal, such a one is a *rara avis*, nay, a myth. Possessors of untold wealth are never inclined to celebrate yagas and yagnas on a large scale

with bounteous sacrificial fees and gifts. For, who would attract by his wealth or the appearance of it, the robbers or the royal officers who are no better? Masters of song and dance never conduct the temple festivals. The sacred spots and waters are powerless to attract huge crown of pilgrims; for, both conduce to the material and spiritual welfare of the state. No merchant thrives in his trade. Bards and minstrels, teachers and expounders of the sacred lore never gladden and elevate the hearts and intellects of the people; for, where could you gather an audience who would be so free from care and anxiety as to be inclined to listen to such themes? No profound scholars or *literati* would meet one another in the halls of learning and hold subtle disputes; for, who will arrange such peaceful and profitable meetings? Who has the time or the means to reward them as they deserve? You do not come across young maidens in the public gardens, in gay attire, gathering the star-like flowers or disporting themselves in the cool waters; for the thief is ever present. No happy parties coursing fast in their graceful conveyances to the woods; for, robbers and lawless men infest every road and path. Men grown rich thro' farming or agriculture never enjoy the watchful care and protection of the king and sink into the arms of sleep with doors that know no bolts nor fastenings. There go not along the royal road elephants sixty years old, ever in rut, with gleaming tusks and melodiously sounding bells. No more falls upon the ear, the martial twang of the bow and the whirr of the flying shafts, as the young warriors take the degrees in the science of archery. No caravans of merchants journey to far countries with the wealth of a kingdom in their packs. No recluse, no

hermit, an anchorite, no man of god that, with controlled self, keeps away from the madding crowd's ignoble strife and moves all alone, with the glorious image of the Lord, ever enshrined in his heart of hearts, finding a happy home wherever night chances to overtake him; for, where is he who would feed such a one? No acquiring of fresh wealth and goods, nor peaceful possession of what was earned with labour and toil. No armies that cheerfully march to battle and either return with victory or die where they stand with grim faces turned towards the foe. No well-dressed citizens move about the town on business or pleasure, in palanquins or chariots, or on horses or elephants. Experts in the sastras never hold converse on high themes in the asramas of the rishis or in the gardens about the town. You come upon no devout and pious crowds of men and women hastening to the fanes of the gods to worship them with reverent offerings of garlands, cakes, fruits or money. No bands of youthful princes adorned with sandal, aloe, or other perfumes, like stately trees over whom spring has thrown her flowered robes. Like a dried up watercourse, or a grassless meadow or a masterless herd, a kingless land comes to no good. A banner is the living sign of a chariot; smoke proclaims the presence of fire; and our majesty, who was our living representative and sign, has chosen to quite this world for that of the gods. In a kingless land none dares to call anything his own. Like fish in the ocean, the great feed upon the small and they upon the smaller and so on *ad infinitum*. Those that were severely punished by the king for falling away from the duties of their rank and order, those who proclaim and live a godless life, this is their day of power and glory. They wreak their hoarded

vengeance upon the good and the innocent; and the world will laud them to the skies as great men and holy.

"The eye ever seeks the good of the body and keeps off evil; even so a king stands between his subjects and evil; he is the horn of Plenty thro' which showers on them every comfort and luxury. Truth and Dharma have their springs in him; nay he is Truth; he is Dharma. He makes every provision for high-born men to discharge the duties of their order unimpeded. He is the father of his subjects; he is their well-wisher and benefactor.

"The God of death is entrusted but with the adjustment of the karmic results. Kubera is charged but with the dispensing of wealth to those that deserve it; the three worlds look forward to Indra but to protect them; it devolves upon Varuna but to hold all beings to the laws of life; and, these Regents of the quarters rule but over a portion of the population of the earth. But the king combines in himself the functions of all the Four; he is the sole protector and ruler of all the quarters: hence the Regents stand infinitely below him.

"Alas! If there be no king in a country to enquire into right and wrong, this world and all it contains would grow dark with ignorance and sin, as when the Night of dissolution wraps it in its deadly folds.

"The mighty ocean does not overstep its confines; even so, your word was Gospel to us when his majesty was alive. And now, it is doubly sacred. Wisest and best of Brahmanas! Revolve well in your mind our pitiable condition that roam like a masterless herd. Cast your eyes on this fair realm, now no better than a howling wilderness; and place over us any deserving son of Dasaratha as our king."

CHAPTER LXVIII.

BHARATA SUMMONED.

So spake Sumantra and the other ministers, supported by Markandeya and the other brahmanas.

Vasishtha gave meet reply: "Bharata resides at present, and Satrughna with him, at Rajagriha, the capital of his uncle. Let fleet coursers bear our envoys to bring him back on the wings of speed. His majesty has elected Bharata to take his place on the throne; and we do ill to delay. I see my proposal is acceptable to you. Siddhartha! Vijaya! Jayanta! Asokanandana! Draw near and pay heed while I instruct you in detail as to what you should do. Find fleet horses to convey you to Rajagriha, as soon as you can; betray not in the least any signs of the sad calamity that has befallen us; salute the princes respectfully and say to Bharata 'Lord! Vasishtha, your chaplain and the other ministers make kind enquiries of you. They send word through me that you come back at once in connexion with a very important affair.' No word nor hint should escape you of the unhappy exile of Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta to the woods or of the demise of our monarch. Take with you fine dresses and precious ornaments as presents to the king of Kekaya. Delay not." He provided them amply with funds for the journey.

They went home, took leave of their people, made careful preparations for the long journey and soon left Ayodhya behind them on steeds fleet as the wind. They rode west and turned north through the mounts Aparatala and Pralamba, following the course of the Malini. North of Pralamba, they again resumed their westerly course, crossed the Ganga near Hastinapura and

travelled into the Panchala country thro' the Kurujangala dominions, feasting their eyes on many a beautiful lake and flooded stream. On, they rode still west; they crossed the lovely Saradanda; on its western bank there stood the mighty tree named Satyapayachana, to the Spirit of which they offered due adoration and worship. They passed by the city of Kulinga, and crossed the mount Bodhibhavana. The hamlet Abhikala was soon left behind and the Ikshumati came into view, the ancient boundary of the Ikshawaku kings for generations past count. Brahmanas profoundly learned in the Vedas, drank of its waters with their hollowed palms. Thro' Bahleeka they passed, on towards the mount Sudama. They paid due reverence to the impress of the holy feet of Vishnu on it and passing by the Vipasa and the Salmali, they covered leagues and leagues of hill and dale, river and rivulet, lake and pool, while fierce lions, tigers and bears stared at them as they tore through the forests like a hurricane. "If we bring back Bharata as soon as we can, the funeral rites of Dasaratha will be performed forthwith and he will ascend to the worlds of happiness. If we take back Bharata as soon as we can, Kosala will have a king and the masterless millions, a protector. Further, Bharata will be mightily pleased at being chosen to render his royal father the last offices in death." These thoughts spurred them on to greater speed. And so, they entered the city of Girivraja on jaded horses after sunset.

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CHAPTER LXIX.

BHARATA'S DREAM.

THE day broke sadly for Bharata; he dreamt a dream in the last watches of the night and was grieved to think that it would prove too true. His friends noticed his gloom and sought to chase it away. Some played on the veena and other musical instruments; some sought to engross him in the silken toils of dance and song; some declaimed plays in Samskrita, Prakrita, Paischasa, Magadha and other dialects; some drew him into light and humorous talk; others related droll stories and tales. A dear friend of his noticed that his thoughts were far away and were engrossed with some sad subject, and said, "Friend! your face is not as bright and cheerful as usual. Some great grief weighs on your soul. Will you not allow us to share it with you?"

To which Bharata: "Would you like to know the cause of my unwonted darkness of spirits? Last night I had a dream, when I saw my father with dishevelled hair and dirty limbs leap off a lofty mountain into a deep pool filled with liquid cowdung and swim there in high glee. Ever and anon he drank oil from his hollowed palms and laughed uproariously. His body dripped with oil. He ate ravenously of food prepared with sesamum and took a header into a deep pool of oil. The ocean dried up revealing its sandy bottom. The moon fell from the sky. A great darkness blotted out the world. The tusks of the state elephant shivered to atoms. Blazing fires went out all on a sudden. Earthquakes split the solid globe; trees withered and shriveled; mountains emitted black fumes, His majest-

was seated on a throne of black iron, dressed in black robes, while women of black and yellow hue stood round and clapped their hands in maniac laughter. Next, he decked himself with red sandal paste and red garlands, took his seat on a chariot drawn by asses and drove south in deadly haste. A Rakshasi clad in red, dragged him along, her hideous face distorted with unholy mirth. These sights of ill-omen troubled my dreams last night. One of us, his majesty or Rama or myself is sure to die.

"If you dream of driving in a chariot drawn by asses, you are sure to see ere long the smoke rising up from your prye. Now, you have the key to my heavy heart and apparent indifference to all you so kindly do to cheer it. My throat is parched; my mind undergoes some nameless torment; I see nothing that could cause me fear, but I have not the slightest doubt that I am in its grip. My words, voice and tones have lost their wonted dignity and force. I am shorn of my brightness and lustre. I hate myself; but, I cannot lay my finger on that which lies behind all these manifestations. Never had I any dream like this. I am convinced beyond a doubt that it will be fulfilled. My heart is invaded with a growing fear when I associate this ill-omened dream with my sire of superhuman excellences."

CHAPTER LXX.

BHARATA RETURNS TO AYODHYA.

HE was yet speaking when the envoys from Ayodhya entered the impregnable Rajagriha upon horses trembling with fatigue and exhaustion,

born of fast and furious riding. They paid their respects to the king of Kekaya, and placed before Yudhajit, the heir-apparent, the presents they had brought with them. When he had duly rewarded them, they turned to Bharata, touched his feet and said, " Lord! The high-priest, Maharshi Vasishtha and the other councillors make kind and respectful enquiries of you. They directed us to say to you, 'Come back to Ayodhya without a moment's delay, as an important affair requires your presence here. Select what you approve of the dresses and ornaments we send you and hand over twenty crores worth to your grand sire and ten crores worth to your uncle.' "

Bharata did so and entertained the messengers with extreme kindness and hospitality; then he asked them " My sire, is it all well with him? Is it all well with the great Ones, Rama and Lakshmana? I hope queen Kausalya does well, the happy mother of Rama the soul of wisdom. She is the deserving object of my respect in every way; blind to the defects of others, she is as keenly appreciative of everything good in them. Well conversant with the mysteries of Dharma, she practises them to the best of her ability. Is it all well with queen Sumitra, she that bore Lakshmana and Satrughna? And is it all well with my mother Kaikeyi, ever selfish, cruel-eyed, liable to sudden fits of anger and supremely self-conceited? What message bore you from her to her people here?" The messengers saw that Bharata had some faint conception of the real state of things at Ayodhya and hastened to disabuse him by their prompt reply, " Lord! It is all well with those whose welfare you ever have at heart. Everything good and auspicious awaits you there. It is time for us to start." They gave him a general assurance

of the welfare of his people, afraid to awake his suspicions by a detailed news of his friends and kin. It was with a purpose that they used the words 'good and auspicious,' for they wished to ward off all evil and ill-omen from him, and give him a faint hint of his approaching greatness; but they suceeded in keeping back from him any mention of the doings at Ayodhya.

Then Bharata sought his grandsire and said, "The messengers form Ayodhya would have me start at once. Pray give me leave; I will be with you whenever you may desire my presence here." The lord of Kekaya embraced him warmly, kissed him on the head and said, "Darling! I wish you a happy journey. Fortunate is Kaikeyi that bore you. Convey my kind enquiries to her, to Dasaratha, to Maharshi Vasishtha, to the other saintly brahmanas and last, not least, to the heroic princes Rama and Lakshmana." He spoke his high appreciation of Bharata's manifold excellences, presented him with elephants of noble breed, shawls of rare workmanship, curiously prepared deer skins, two thousand nishkas to grace the breast and one thousand six hundred steeds. He called to him faithful councillors and noble and said," Go with Bharata and see that these things reach Ayodhya safe." Yudhajit, his uncle, presented him with numerous elephants from mounts Iravat and Indrasiras; mules, skillfully trained and fleet as the wind or thought; and, besides, many noble hounds. Carefully bred and trained in the royal appartments, of immense strength and endurance, they were fiercer than tigers. Armed with formidable spear-like fangs, their exquisite symmetry of form and development masked their huge chests and limbs. But Bharata, absorbed with the thought of being back at Ayodhya as soon as possible, delighted not in the rich and

curious presents. The unusual haste and solicitude that marked the action of the messengers, deepened the gloom and anxiety bred of his evil dream.

He took hasty leave of his grandsire and uncle, and with Satrughna by his side, soon left the city far behind. His attendants followed him in chariots drawn by camels, bullocks, horses and mules. Like bands of devas marching forth from the capital of Indra, Bharata and Satrughna journeyed on towards Ayodhya, surrounded by the armies of Kekaya.

CHAPTER LXXI.

BHARATA RETURNS TO AYODHYA (*continued*)

THEY turned their faces eastwards, crossed the Sudama and Hladini and at Eladana, famous for its cardamoms, the Satadru flowing,west. They stayed a while to rest at the village Aparaparpata and crossed the Silavaha that mysteriously draws to itself blocks of granite. They passed through the town Salyakartana that lies to the south-east of it and Bharata relieved the people there of a great fear. They then travelled over high and inaccessile mountains to have a view of the beautiful forests Chaitraratha. The Sarasvati and the Sindhu, a tributary of the Ganga, were duly crossed and the party entered the forest of Bharunda, north of the dominions of Veeramatsya. The rapid Kulinga, enclosed by mountains and rocks, crossed theirpath near the Yumana ; and on its further banks they camped during the hot noon-day sun. Some time was allowed to them to rest after their rapid and arduous journey. The horses enjoyed the cool shade and later on had a delightful bad in the river.

They had their dinner and stored water enough to last them during their march thro' the desert that lay before them. Like the Lord of air whom lofty mountains stay not, Bharata crossed the terrible desert on elephants of the Bhadra breed, specially made, as it were, to journey through those waterless wastes. It was difficult to cross the Ganga near the city of Amsudana; so, they chose Pragvata instead. Crossing the river Kutikoshtika, they came to the village of Dharmavardana. They passed west of the village of Torana and reached Varoodha, passing by the village of Jambuprasta. They spent the night in the forest hard by and starting again at day-break, they travelled on east until they camped in a grove of madhooka trees near the town of Ujjihana. Beyond lay the realms of Kosala. So Bharata ordered his troops to proceed leisurely and travelled fast, putting to his chariot fleet coursers. He stopped for a night at the village of Sarvateertha and easily crossed Uttanika and other rivers by means of horses born and bred in the mountains. He rode through the river Kutika near the village of Hastiprishta and journeyed on, crossing the rivers Kapeevati, Sthanumati, and Gomati near the towns of Lauhitya, Ekasala and Vinata. He rested for a while in a grove near the town of Kalinga, traversed the forest during the night and day dawned upon him as he entered Ayodhya.

Seven days and seven nights was he on the road and on the morning of the eighth, he drove into the capital of his kingdom and said to his driver, "This Ayodhya, famed thro' the three worlds and encircled by sacred groves, appears to-day to have been shorn of its glory and happiness. The walls are white and have not been smeared with cowdung for some days. The brahmanas that make this city their home, are masters

of the vedas and the vedanta; self-restraint, self-control and other attendant virtues crown them with glory. Under the watchful care and rule of Dasaratha, the saintly king, they spend their vast wealth in the performance of yagas and yagnas. How is it that there reach not our ears the sounds of men and women joyfully moving about? Why do we not see happy couples enjoy themselves the whole night in the lovely gardens about the town and depart to their abodes at day-break? Stateliness and beauty have gone away from Ayodhya and it seems to be weeping in solitary grief. Is it the fair capital of Dasaratha I see before me, or its ruins? The notables of the town do not drive fast on elephants horses and other conveyances, happily busy. The pleasure-gardens wear a joyless and dilapidated look, formerly so gay with parrots, cuckoos and bees maddened on the lucious fruits, roots and honey; the rare exotics carefully manured, watered and preserved; the flowery bowers, pools and artificial mountains skillfully arranged to afford every comfort and luxury to the countless couples that frequent them. Trees shed their leaves like fast-falling tears. It is sunrise and yet no beasts or birds go about to seek their prey with happy and joyful cries. The cool wind wafts not, as of yore, the delicious perfumes of sandal, aloe and incense. The ear is not delighted with the sweet sounds of veena, drum or tabor rising forth on every side. But many omens of cruel import meet the eye on every side. Some great calamity is speeding towards us. Would that I were assured of the safety and happiness of my kinsmen and friends. My heart is heavy and faint." Tortured with vague doubts, oppressed with a nameless woe, he drove, as one demented, thro' the Vaijayanta gate fast and furiously towards the royal palace,

the guards saluting him with cries of "Hail! All hail to thee!" He returned their salute, stopped them at the palace gates and with a mind teeming with a thousand conjectures, said to his charioteer, "Why am I sent for in such hot haste with no apparent reason? I suspect some great calamity; for, my heart is faint, I see around me all the signs of a kingdom widowed of its lord and ruler. Behold the houses of respectable citizens unswept, uncleaned, unadorned, with open doors and a deserted look. No sweet incense rises up from them, nor any smoke from the holy fires, reverently tended. The inmates sit dazed and listless, bestowing no care on themselves or on their belongings. The fanes of the holy gods are vacant of bright garlands or chaplets; dust and dirt offend the eye everywhere; the priests and the attendants have abandoned them. Each holy shrine is utterly neglected and the gods receive not due worship. The merchants sit in blank dismay with no eye to business. The birds in the sacred precincts and holy trees droop with glassy looks and folded wings. Groups of men and women stand along the streets in stupid amaze, their never-ceasing tears making channels thro' their faces and bodies caked with dirt and dust." And so, he rode on to the palace, viewing the dire signs of woe and grief along the way. The squares and the royal roads that led from the palace, he found lonely and silent. The gates were thickly coated with dust and presented a repusive sight, for, there was none to trouble himself to clean them. Ayodhya was in ruins, once so bright and resplendent with wealth and pomp, even as the capital of Indra. Those strange portents and eye-offending views deepened his gloom and bowed his head as he entered the palace of Dasaratha.

CHAPTER LXXII.

BHARATA'S GRIEF.

HE found not the king in his apartments and sought him in those of his mother Kaikeyi. She could not contain her joy and sprang forward to meet her son after his long absence abroad. He entered the dismal palace and saluted his mother by touching her feet with his head. She clasped him to her breast, her darling son, smelt his head, and seated him on her lap, crying "How long is it since you started from your grandsire's city? Poor child, you are almost fainting from fatigue, from fast and furious driving. Is it all well with my father and my brother? I wish to hear every detail concerning you, since you left this place. But, had you a safe and pleasant journey here?"

And Bharata made reply "Mother, it is seven days since I left Rajagriha. Your father and my uncle Yudhajit are doing well. They would load me with presents and my people could not travel fast in consequence; so I drove in advance, leaving them to follow leisurely. What means this extreme haste to fetch me back? How is it that this golden bed and seat are adorned not by their usual occupant? Does he not keep good health? Has he anything on his mind? He spends his spare moments with you and so I came here to pay him my respects. Where can I find him? Is he perchance staying with Lady Kausalya? I must see him this instant."

Her heart was wrapped with her unholy ambition to secure the crown for her son; hence she fondly imagined that her terrible news would be most gratifying to him. So she turned to Bharata and said to him as he stood there all ignorant of the lamentable fate of his sire

"The glorious king, so noble, so righteous, has even gone the way of all beings." The shock was too much for Bharata whose pure white soul inherited the virtues of a long race of saintly kings. "Ha! I am lost" cried he; and stern warrior as he was and of undaunted fortitude, he fell down in a dead faint. But grief rudely dragged him back to life and to its torments. "Like the Queen of Night in her perfect pomp and splendour as she rides through the clear skies, yon golden seat shone with the king reclining on it; and how hateful and repulsive it looks, in even as a moonless sky or the dried-up ocean." A storm of tears choked his words and he covered his face and wept aloud.

In dire dismay, Kaikeyi saw her son writhe on the ground in the grip of sorrow, like the Lords of day and night hurled down to the earth or a maddenned elephant in the deadly toils of the hunters or like the stately monarch of the forest felled down by the axe of the woodsman. She raised him up lovingly and said "Arise, arise, lord of kings. Arise, chosen favourite of fame, Why roll your shapely limbs in dirt and dust? It befits you not, this grief. The world praises you as a mine of excellences. Your intellect finds its right work in sacrificial rites and profuse gifts, as the result of faithfully followings the behests of the Holy Writ and its loving exponents. The sun's rays will sooner desert him than your mighty heart be shaken by grief or misfortune." She strove to console him many a wise; but Bharata rose not from where he lay, nor ceased his piteous wails nor recovered from the cruel wounds caused by his mother's terrible words.

"Alas! I went away from here firmly assured that his majesty will crown Rama as heir-apparent and will conduct countless sacrifices. My fond hopes have

turned to dust and ashes. My heart breaks when I do not behold his majesty who was ever absorbed in the welfare of beings. What is the fell disease that rendered me fatherless and I far away? Supremely blessed are Rama and Lakshmana to be with him during his last moments and render him every service and attention. May be my father knows not I am here; else, he would clasp me fondly to his heart, smell my head and shed tears of joy. Words fail me to describe my feelings when he would wipe the dust off my body with his own hands. Somebody hasten to Rama's palace and respectfully submit that I await his pleasure to touch the feet of him who is to me brother, father, king and lord, all in one. To one who walks in the way of Dharma, the elder brother is a father. If his majesty has chosen to depart for the Mansions of the Blessed, whom shall I take refuge in but Rama? My father lives in him and should I not hasten to pay him my respects? My sire of blessed memory, was profoundly versed in the mysteries of Dharma. He never swerved from his allegiance to Truth. Principle and practice went hand in hand with him; unexampled valor was only one of the countless excellences that adorned him. What was his last message to me, his last advice, his last commands? I long to hear it."

Kaikeyi was quick with her reply. "You were not in his thoughts when he laid aside his body of flesh. 'Ha Rama! Ha Lakshmana! Ha Seeta!' were the last words upon his lips. Like a mighty elephant writhing in his strong toils, your sire gazed at me at the moment of death and cried 'Ha! blessed are they to whom it is given to behold Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta as they enter Ayodhya after their period of exile'." Bharata was sore stricken at the news of Dasaratha's death;

deeper, yet deeper, did the iron enter his soul at the woeful news of the infamous exile of Rama and Lakshmana. "Where is he, the soul of righteousness, the darling son of Kausalya ? Why do I not see Lakshmana and Seeta ?" The foolish Kaikeyi knew not that her news would be all hateful and repulsive to Bharata ; she fondly expected that it would the happiest day of his life when he should hear that she had secured for him the throne of the Ikshwakus, over the head of the rightful claimant, Rama. "To the forest of Dandaka have they betaken themselves, in the guise of lovly hermits, Rama and Lakshmana with Seeta for a companion."

Bharata knew right well that the scions of the Ikshwaku race were ever wedded to the Path of right ; a mighty fear came over him, born of the suspicion that Rama might have been so exiled for some dark crime or offence. With faltering accents he ventured to ask " What brahmana has Rama deprived of house, land or gold ? What poor wight all innocent did he persecute ? Whose wife or woman did he cast adulterous looks upon ? Why have they driven him to the forest of Dandaka, as if he were the foul slayer of a brahmana that walked in the path of the Holy Writ ?"

As is the way of womankind, Kaikeyi's heart beat high with the joy of her glorious achievement and she was all afire to boast of what she had done and what she meant to do. She was the crowned queen of fools; yet her-self-conceit and haughty pride passed all thought. " Darling ! No brahmana was ever the poorer for Rama's presence in Ayodhya. No poor innocent received any but the kindest treatment at his hands. Know you not that his eyes are never raised to the faces of other's women? I came to understand that the king meant to seat him the throne and quite naturally demanded of your father

on that you should succeed to the crown and that Rama should be banished to the woods. He promised me accordingly and I had no little difficulty in holding him to it. Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta cheerfully obeyed the commands of the monarch and departed to the woods. Rama was near and dear to Dasaratha; grief at being separated from him was too much for the poor aged monarch and he pined to death in consequence. Arise and reign as the royal traditions would have you. All this I planned and wrought for you; and it is but an earnest of what I mean to do for you. Grieve not; cast aside sorrow and pain of heart; pluck up courage. This fair kingdom is yours to rule, teeming with wealth and corn, abundance and plenty. This Ayodhya salutes you as its lord. Quickly pay the funeral dues to your father, as Vasishtha and other religious experts guide you. Let my fond mother's heart be gladdened with the sight of my darling son seated on the throne of the Ikshwakus, ruler of this broad earth and all it contains."

CHAPTER LXXIII.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

WITH a darkening heart did Bharata listen to the glowing description of his father's pitiabte death, of his brother's unjust doom. Uncontrollable grief filled his heart and found vent in winged words of flame. "What have I to do with this vast empire, a luckless wretch, with the heavy sin on my soul of the murder of my father and the consigning to a living death of my brothers? Your cruel hand cuts deeper and yet deeper into the wound your have caused and lays

salt and fire upon the gashes. Is it not enough for one man to bear, the foul murder of my sire? Would not your wretched soul rest until it had immured Rama in the depths of the dark forests? Like the Night of Dissolution that blots out the whole universe and all it contains, where did you lie in wait all the while to bring disgrace and destruction upon the fair line of Ikshwaku? Alas! his majesty took you into his household, all unawares, even as one clasps to his bosom coals of living fire. His death lies heavy upon your soul; I see your hand slay him. Shame on your house! Was it for this that you were brought up in luxury and comfort, in pomp and splendour, by your father and your husband? My sire never knew what it was to go back upon his word; his bright fame illumined the worlds; yet he took you to himself as wife and lost every thing—happiness, honour, fame and life. What set you on to seek the death of his majesty whose heart ever turned to Dharma as the guiding star of his life? What sought you to achieve by banishing Rama to the woods? Even if it so chances that Kausalya and Sumitra survive the shock of separation from their beloved sons, I am sure your merciless heart will not allow them to live long.

"Dare you say that Rama, the paragon of virtue, waited not upon you as dutifully and reverently as he did upon Kausalya that bore him? Dharma has no mysteries for him. Kausalya, the far-sighted, was ever a dear sister to you, the fondest you can ever have; deny it if you can. And is not Rama, the first-born of that righteous lady who deservedly takes her place on the throne by the side of the lord of Kosala? I marvel that your dark soul knows not sorrow nor contrition, not the slightest, even when you have driven the noble

One to the dreary forests, to live the lowly life of homeless hermits.

"Let be. Just tell me what your ambition, dark and ominous, aims at, now that you have driven away from this kingdom my pure and heroic brother of undimmed fame? My poor intellect compasses it not. Your greed, your lust for wealth and power has blinded you so that you see not the boundless reverence and love my heart bears to Rama: for, if you had but an inkling of the truth, you will never dare to perpetrate this monstrous crime to secure for me this pitiable inheritance. What did you count upon to enable me to rule ever this vast empire, with Rama and Lakshmana far away in the distant wilds? The golden Meru rejoices in the strength and protection of the woods that adorn its sides, to guard every approach to it; even so Dasaratha, virtuous and mighty as he was, trusted most in Rama's valour and strength. A tender calf I, what chance to draw the load that would strain to the utmost the full-grown strength of a bull? I am a boy in years and intellect; what put it into your head that I had it in me to wield the sceptre that Dasaratha's mighty hand held over this boundless empire for twice thirty thousand years? Grant that I, as the son of the famous Emperor, could manage to keep myself on the throne, more by might of intellect and strength of policy; yet lay this to your heart right well—never, never will I see you rejoice in the fulfilment of your miserable schemes, you who wrought all this nameless havoc and destruction but to secure wealth and power to you son.

"Were it not that my hands are bound by the love and the reverence that Rama bears towards you as his mother, this very instant will see you hunted out of the kingdom, far, far beyond human habitation. Who put

you up to ask of his majesty that the crown should go to a younger son, in utter defiance of the claims of the elder? Has it any precedent in the records of my famous house? What a fool I am to speak in the same breath of yourself and the ways of the good and the righteous! I cannot, for my life, contain my wonder when I think how your foolish woman's heart was egged on to this daring act. It is a world-wide tradition of the line of Ikshwaku that the crown always descends to the eldest son; his brothers always obey and reverence him as a father. Nay, this is characteristic of every royal house from the beginnings of time; and all the more binding on the line of Ikshwaku. But what have you, a fiend incarnate, in common with kingly tradition or the eternal duty that lies on the lords of men? My ancestors, of glorious memory, bore the palm among those that guarded, with sleepless vigilance, Dharma and unstained honor; and now nature has, after infinite and patient labour, produced a paragon of virtue in you, to lay your axe at the roots of the fair tree of honour and fame that my forefathers have reared with so much care and toil. Stay, the kings of Kekaya, to whose house you say you belong, are noble souls and reverently follow this traditional policy. Then, what foul fiend twisted and warped your heart and brains to contrive and execute this monstrous atrocity?

"Come what may, I will not lend myself to gratify your dark ambition. Do I not see that your ravening lust of power seeks to rule thro' me, a miserable puppet on the throne? Wait a while and you will see me bring back from the woods Rama, the beloved of all creation; I shall crown him in pomp and splendour right before your eyes; my life will be one long day of happiness,

rendering him every service and attention. I will not rest content unless grief and disappointment kill you by inches; your miserable heart shall crumble to dust under the shock of shattered hopes." Thus did Bharata rebuke Kaikeyi with cruel words and seek to give vent to the surging sorrow that threatened to burst his heart. But it was too little for him, what he had done; and like the noble king of the beasts thundering from his mountain lair at the sight of his foe, did he wax in his rage and thunder out his reproaches and taunts.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

THE WAGES OF SIN (CONTD)

BHARATA felt that he had but dealt lightly, very lightly with the woman who called herself his mother. The more he dwelt in imagination upon her unspeakable crime and its dreadful results, furious indignation mastered him quite, and he pierced her heart with sharp and cruel words. "Monster of cruelty! Perfection of wickedness! take yourself away from this kingdom, from the sight of man, even as my grandsire hunted your mother out of the country for her heartlessness and crimes. Do you expect me to survive the death of my sire and the banishment of my brothers and all at your hands? Count me as dead; and wail and gnash you teeth as long as your sinful life retains its hold upon the body, for the foul sin of having compassed the deaths of your husband, of your sons Rama and Lakshmana, of Seeta and of the countless millions that inhabit this city. My sire or Rama, how did they cross your path? Can you show another such devoted servant of virtue and duty as my brother? What

wrong what injustice did you suffer at their hands that you should in one and the same moment, slay the one and banish the other? You have destroyed this fair line of Ikshwaku and have thereby burdened your soul with the sin of having murdered a brahmana for whom the Holy Writ has no mysteries. The deepest and the darkest hells call out to you to tenant them for all time; for, not for you the bright worlds where your husband sits on his throne of glory. My heart trembles in affright at the recollection of your hideous sin, I, the son born of your loins; for, what devilish brain could ever conceive and compass the murder of your lord and husband and the exile of Rama, the beloved of all beings? It was your hand, I say, that plunged the dagger into the heart of my father; it was your hand that drove from this fair realm, by lawful right theirs, my brothers and Seeta. Boundless and eternal sway over the kingdom of infamy and disgrace is what you have secured for me, your glorious heritage; and right well have you crowned your efforts by bespeaking for me the miserable fate that awaits the foulest sinners. Fool, possessed of the demon of ambition! Is it a woman I see before me or a fierce blood-thirsty tiger of the jungles? Are you not my most relentless foe that has taken my mother's form to work evil and misery upon me all the more easily? Famous beyond compare in the annals of sin! Foul muderress of your fond devoted husband! soil not my ears with your hated speech. Lo! Kausalya, Sumitra and the other royal ladies are drowned in grief, all through your vile machinations. Bright fame and incomparable have you secured to the house that gave you birth, to the house that took you in! King Asvapati is famed for his generous and noble instincts; age and wisdom sit gracefully upon him; hence, no reason could

ever reconcile one to call you his daughter. It is nearer truth to say that some malignant demon has chosen this form to bring destruction upon this house. Hear me one again; you have buried in the depths of the dark forests Sree Ramachandra, the living embodiment of duty and truth; you have directed the grief engendered thereof to bring about the death of our lord and king; what object in creation, be it the meanest and the most wicked, would ever regard you with affection or sympathy, you that has rendered me fatherless and brotherless at one stroke? Can you ever expect pity or compassion at the hand of others? What bright worlds on high do you hope to enter after having torn her only son from the arms of Kausalya, whose heart knows no stain and whose old age you have rendered helpless and unbearable? Annihilation, utter and certain, stares you in the face; my mind can grasp at no other milder fate that awaits you. Rama is the son of Kausalya, your co-wife; but what blinded you to the fact that he is the source of life and light to his kith and kin: that he is entitled in every way to stand by the side of Dasaratha and that the untold millions in this empire would quit their hold on life if he is taken away from them? It is utterly inconceivable that any one could entertain the faintest shadow of a doubt upon this.

"The Books tell us that the son is but the father born again; he springs from the father's heart, where the jeeva sits enthroned; that which passes from the father is but the energy, the essence of the face, neck, chest, stomach, hand, feet, eyes, nose, fingers and the other parts of the body. A mother is drawn more towards the child born to her, the flesh of her flesh, than towards the mother that bore her, the brothers and the sisters that came into the world with her or the kin

that claim with her the common tie of blood. Then, how did you expect Kausalya to stand the shock of a life-long separation from such a son?

"Once in the far past, Kamadhenu, the Cow of Plenty, who saw with clear vision into the mysteries of Dharma, turned its eyes to the earth and observed a farmer ploughing a large field with two oxen yoked to the pole. Poor beasts! They had laboured from morn right to the hour when the sun reaches the highest point in his course; and naturally they dropped with fatigue and exhaustion. The tie of blood brought tears to the eyes of Surabhi and she wept aloud at the sight of the misery that befell the beasts that came of her line. The Lord of the celestials chanced to pass that way on some business of his and the tear-drops fell upon him with divine fragrance. He looked up and beheld Kamadhenu weeping in the bitterness of her grief. All reverently did he question her with joined palms; 'Mother, why grieve so? Had you any insult or injustice at the hands of me or mine? Ever intent upon the welfare of all creation, whence comes this woe upon you? I see no reason why fear from any one should disturb your rest?' And to him replied the Cow of Plenty, 'I fear none. Behold these pair of oxen born of my race, yoked by yon farmer to the plough and made to work from dewy morn to noon-day sun; they have fainted away from fatigue. Lean, emaciated, too weak to get up; yet the heartless hind tears at the roots of my heart when he goads them on to fresh work; my frame quivers with their agony. Blood is thicker than water; and a son is the dearest object that the world can give a mother.'

"Now, for all that, they were not born from the loins of Kamadhenu; countless millions has she of such

children. She is perfect in the theory and practice of Dharma; the head and fountain of all prosperity, wealth, graces of head and heart, she is ever engaged in the propagation of the species by the union of the male and the female. Millions call her their mother; yet she shed bitters tears at the sight of the misery that befell two nameless oxen. Look here, Rama was born of the womb of Kausalya; he is her only son, born after milleniums of cold barrerness; all virtues, all excellences strive with one another to crown him. Kausalya is a woman; age has dimmed her beauty; she is no longer the favorite wife of the king; she looks to her son for every thing; and do you hope to go scot free, having torn her darling child from her arms? Ceaseless woe and eternal infamy are your portion here on earth; and utter annihilation awaits you on the threshold of death.

"I will conduct the funeral rites of my sire; I will entreat Rama to return to Ayodhya and sit on the throne of his fathers; I will wipe this foul blot on my name and win everlasting fame. Then I will take it upon myself to lead the life of a recluse in the forests of Dandaka. I cannot bear to look upon the citizens of this fair city weep and bewail their miserable lot; nor will I put up patiently with the dark sin you have perpetrated. Throw yourself into the blazing fire; bury yourself in the darkest depths of Dandaka, far from the sight of man; or hang yourself by the neck until you are dead. In no other way can you expiate your crime; no other course is open to you. My heart will know no peace unless Rama comes back from the woods and rules over his people. Then alone can I hope that the world will pardon somewhat my driving him into cruel exile." And as a lordly elephant in rut,

ranging free the forest glades is borne to the ground under the showers of spears, goads, harpoons, lances and other missiles, heaving furious sighs; or as the lofty Indradhwaja thrown on the earth at the close of Indra's festival, even so did Bharata fall at her feet in a dead faint, his eyes red with weeping, his dress and ornaments all in wild disorder.

CHAPTER LXXV.

BHARATA'S ABJURATION.

MEANWHILE Sumantra and the other ministers sought him out there, informed of his arrival. He came back to his senses and saw the trusted councillors of his sire around him. The desire came upon him to clear himself in their eyes of all blame or complicity. He pointed to Kaikeyi where she stood, a living corpse, her fond hopes blasted and her foul sin recoiling upon herself. "Friends of mine! Never, for a single moment, did my heart hanker after this kingdom; nor did I, at my time, seek her infernal advice towards it. I was all ignorant, in the far-off capital of my grandsire, of my father's resolve to crown me as heir apparent or that he banished Rama in consequence or that Lakshmana and Seeta accompanied him."

Kausalya heard him lamenting piteously and said to herself, "So, Bharata has come, the hopeful son of the cruel demon yclept Kaikeyi; but I cannot bring myself to think that he has anything to do with her unholy plots. It behoves me to see him." She dragged her wasted body and feeble limbs to where he was, pale with grief, demented, while the faithful Sumitra held her up; and it so chanced that Bharata and Satrughna

were going to her rooms to pay their respects to her. They met her half-way; her pitiable plight wrung their hearts so much that they fell on her neck and cried aloud. She recovered her senses after a while and the woman in her overcame the nobler instincts of magnanimity and forgiveness and put a sharper edge to her grief-laden words. "Long did your soul yearn towards the kingship of Kosala. Your heartless mother has secured it to you anyhow; you need not and you will not stop to cast your eyes over the bloody path she has carved for herself and for you. No rival contests your claims, no rebels causes you a moment of uneasiness or anxiety. Now you may rest awhile after your arduous toil and reap the golden harvest thereof, even to your heart's content. But, may I know what mighty result she achieved when she drove my poor boy to the woods, with matted hair and dress of bark? Absolute master of this realm, she could have easily gratified your wishes without so cruelly punishing your innocent brother. I would count it a mighty boon if you send me to the lonely forest where my son is. The king is not here to prevent it, nor Rama. You have no small part in the sin of Kaikeyi and are debarred from performing his funeral rites; further, his majesty has laid his ban upon you. His eldest wife is entitled to a share of his Agnihothra; so I will pass thro' that fire and take my place by the side of my husband and Sumitra with me. It behoves you to lead me to where my Rama leads his hermit life. For, your worthy mother has toiled hard to secure for you this broad realm teaming with corn and gold, elephants and horses, cattle and kine."

As thus, with cruel taunts, she spoke to him as a stranger and an enemy, Bharata suffered acute agony, as if a red-hot needle was driven to its head in a

grievous sore. Utterly distraught, he fell at her feet and sobbed and raved long and wildly. Then, he stood before her trembling like an aspen leaf, before Kausalya, who moaned and wailed like one in the cruel grip of madness, and spoke humbly and reverently. "No blame is mine. I know naught. Is it kind, is it just of you to speak to me so, knowing full well as you do, my unbounded love and devotion to Rama? If my heart hankered in the least after this wretched kingdom and turned traitor to Rama, may it prove barren, utterly barren, the Vedas, the Sastras, the Sciences, the arts and all knowledge and wisdom I had sat at the feet of my revered guru to learn. May I go the way of him who lends himself as a tool to the wicked; of him who excretes urine and ordure against the sun; of the wretch who strikes at a sleeping cow with his foot; of the monster who sweats his workmen and cheats them of their lawful wages; of him who deals treacherously with the king who walks in the path of right and justice and watches over his people like his sons; of him who takes as king a sixth of all and proves neglectful of his trust; of him who promises sacrificial fees to holy men during the rite and then denies it with overbearing haughtiness; and of him who turns his back upon the foe and flees when dread battle rages high. May my soul be vacant of that esoteric knowledge and wisdom that was imparted to me by my guru to secure for me the high worlds of glory. May I be denied the honour and privilege of beholding the return of Rama and his coronation at Ayodhya, in all his supernal beauty and splendour. May I go the way of him who feeds upon food prepared with sesamum, sweet food or mutton without offering it to the Devas, the Pitris and the guests; of the insolent wretch who slights the elders

without going forward to meet them; of him who reviles his guru; of the false and faithless friend; of him who betrays the confidence placed in him; of the ingrate who renders not back the kindness done him; of the suicide; of him who has been avoided by the good and the virtuous; of him who is dead to all sense of shame and decency; and of the selfish wretch who fills his stomach with good cheer, without a thought of his wife, children and servants who stand by. May I be denied faithful wives and devoted and may I be disqualified from the performance of such Vedic rites as the Agnihotra. May I suffer the torments of those upon whom the curse of barrenness has fallen. May I be dogged by the foul sin of those who slay the royal ladies, children and old men; of those who have abandoned their servants and retainers to a miserable and cruel fate, when they have the power to avert it; of those who feed their dependents by the proceeds of the sale of such articles as red cotton, honey, meat and iron; and of them who pursue and slay the faint-hearted soldier who flees the battle-field when grim slaughter has begun its work. May I be doomed to wander over the earth like a madman, clad in a single piece of cloth, begging from door to door, and with no other vessel to eat from but my hands. May I be the cringing slave to my passions and be drowned in sensual enjoyments and be wedded to wine, women and dice. May my heart avoid the path of Dharma; may it never stray from the path of a Dharma. May my gifts ever be showered upon the unworthy; may my immense wealth, hard-earned, go to enrich thieves and robbers; may my soul writhe in the grip of the sin of sleeping in the twilights, of setting fire to habited houses and of defiling the bed of my guru. May I be precluded from discharging my debts to the Devas by Agnihotra and

offerings of ghee and cakes of rice to the Pithris by Sraddhas and libations of water on the anniversary of their deaths, on the days of the eclipse and on the new-moon day and to my parents by rendering them every service possible when they are alive. May I be shut out from the worlds reached by the good and the virtuous. May I be denied the happiness and joy so highly praised by the good. May I be denied the right to discharge the Dharmas affected by the good. May I be disqualified from rendering kind offices and service to my mother, which is not denied even to the most abandoned of sinners. May my heart be filled with zeal and perseverance in walking along the path of unrighteousness. May I he cursed with dire poverty, a numerous family, chronic illness and a constant melancholy. May my portion be the heinous sin of him who grievously disappoints the hopes of the good men who earnestly look to him to free them from the pangs of miserable poverty and praise him in diverse ways thereunto. May I find a place by the side of him whose speech is ever harsh and unpleasant, whose unclean heart is ever wedded to evil, who, in mortal dread of the king's justice, earns his living by the contemptible profession of a spy and an informer. May I share the dreadful hells inhabited by those who put away from them their faithful wives and pure that seek them to beget a lawful son, in the due season after their courses; of the fools whose hearts are divorced from their wives whom they have sworn before the holy Fires to love and cherish and run after the wives of others; of him who causes the deaths of his wife and children by starving them gradually and systematically; of him who adulterates drinks or poisons them; of him who spoils the worship and adoration rendered to brahmanas; of him who milks the cow dry,

with the expectant calf by its side; of him who promises a drink to another but cheats him of it when he is able to do so; and of him who, chosen as an umpire between two disputants, secretly instructs one of them in the means of overcoming his enemy, out of his love towards him." Thus did Bharata seek to exculpate himself in the eyes of Kausalya and soothe her wounded spirit, who had lost at one stroke a husband and a son; but the effort was too much for him and he fell senseless on the ground.

Then, Kausalya sprang forward to raise him up crying, "My darling! Enough of these terrible vows and abjurations which bind you hard and cause you intolerable pain. I see not the slightest necessity for it. You but rend my heart with blows ever keener. I know very well that your soul is filled with utter devotion to Rama and never swerves from the path of virtue trod by your forefathers of glorious memory. You are true to your word; no one knows you to go back upon it; hence, you will gain the mansions reserved for the good and the righteous; doubt it not." She placed him on her lap, clasped him to her breast, smelt the crown of his head and sobbed aloud as her tears outwelled. Bharata, his heart torn with various griefs and conflicting emotions, his senses distraught, fainted away and spent the live-long hours of the night in sighs and woeful lament.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

DASARATHA'S FUNERAL.

THEN Vasishta of wise words, addressed himself to Bharata, who was sinking under the repeated strokes of grief, confusion and weariness of heart,

and said, "Prince, whose fame illumines the worlds! Enough of grief. Delay not to conduct the funeral ceremonies that ensure the worlds of light to our lord and master." Bharata took heart somewhat, calmed his grief with a strong effort and busied himself with the preparations for the monarch's funeral.

They took the mortal remains of the king of Kosala from the cauldron of oil where it lay and placed it on the ground that the liquid might evaporate. His face had an yellowish hue, but his limbs were in a state of excellent preservation as one in sound sleep. After a time, they transferred it to a costly bed wrought with gold and gems. Bharata sought his father's side and cried "Mighty king! Satrughna and I were far away at my uncle's capital. What dire necessity induced you to send away from your kingdom, Rama, the soul of righteousness and Lakshmana, the prince of heroes and betake yourself to the homes of the gods, even before we came back? Was it just or kind of you to abandon your subjects in their darkest hour of trial and sorrow, when Rama was torn away from them, Rama, the giver of good and happiness to all beings? Whom did you count upon to guard the people well and secure them in safety and comfort, when you have sought the skies and Rama had been forced to hide himself in the dark forests? This earth and all it contains is hideous to look at in widow's weeds and no more fair to see. This Ayodhya is dark and lustreless without you, even as a moonless night."

The holy Vasishtha interrupted him as he lamented grievously and said, "We look to you to pay the last remaining duties to your king and father. Restrain your grief and bend yourself to the task at once."

Bharata acquiesced reverently and summoned the priests and chaplains forthwith. The Garhapatya and

the other sacrificial fires that were duly tended by Dasaratha in the fire-chamber had already been removed outside before the moment of pollution. The priests and their assistants bore them to the cremation ground in order due. Next came the royal attendants, who, with streaming eyes and silent grief, carried the mortal clay of the emperor on a priceless palanquin. Others walked before them scattering along the road various coloured garments and flowers of silver and gold. Others fed the golden censers with essences of sandal, aloe, pine and other perfumes; others raised the pyre with sandal, peadmaka, cedar and other fragrant woods; the royal ladies and their aged retainers around them followed on litters and other conveyances. Then, the priests deposited the royal corpse in the centre of the pile and Bharata headed the procession of the wives of Dasaratha as they walked round the mortal remains of their master, from right to left and from left to right. Bharata lighted the pile with the Agnihotra fire tended so reverently by the departed dead, while the priests conducted the solemn funeral rites, the Hota, the Udgata, and the Adhvaryu chaunting the holy Veda mantras. Experts in the Sama veda sang melodiously the funeral riks enjoined during the service. The laments and shrieks that rose from a thousand women's throats like screaming curlews smote the ear far and wide. Then they moved on to the banks of the Sarayu, where libitations of water were only offered to the names of the dead. The prince returned to Ayodhya with the royal ladies, the councillors and the chaplains, watering the dust with their never-ceasing tears. The royal kinsmen slept on the ground singly during the ten days of the period of pollution.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

DASARATHA'S FUNERAL (CONTD.)

THE ten days passed away; on the eleventh were performed the Punyahavachana, the Navasraddha and other purificatory ceremonies; and on the twelfth the Shodasasraddha, the Masika and the Sapindeekarana. Bharata gave away to the assembled brahmanas, untold wealth in gems, gold, garments, cattle, servant-men, servant-maids and houses. On the morning of the thirteenth day, the prince wept aloud in his sorrow, and proceeded to the crematorium to gather the bones of the dead. He stood at the foot of the pyre and thus spoke to his royal father "Maharajah! You left me in charge of Rama and he has gone to the forest. You too have chosen to go back to the worlds of the gods. Rama, the sole stay and support of Kausalya's old age has been banished by you to the forest. Was it just of you to abandon her to misery and sorrow?" With a mighty cry he fainted away at the sight of the bones and the reddish ashes that were all that was left to him of his beloved father. His kinsmen raised him up even as people draw up tbe Indradhwaja by strong ropes; and like king Yayati looked he as he lay on the ground hurled from heaven in the midst of holy sages. It was too much for Satrughna who fell where he stood like an uprooted oak. They recovered after a while and lamented their fate most piteously. Loving memory brought back to them the boundless kindness and solicitude their father had lavished upon them, the countless benefits and the priceless gifts they had received at his hand on every occasion. "The ocean of sorrow yclept the granting of boons that originated in the dark heart of Manthara

was haunted by the huge sea-monster Kaikeyi and has sucked us down into its fathomless depths. Where have you gone leaving Bharata here to wail miserably, him whom you loved and cherished so much? You used to place before us rich dishes, drinks, garments and ornaments and force us to select what we would of them. Who will love and cherish us so hereafter? Meseems this earth is invulnerable even during the final Dissolution, since it crumbles not to powder when it is widowed of you, its righteous lord and husband. How shall we drag on our miserable existence here, when you have gone back to Swarga and Rama has buried himself in the woods? So, I will come to you though I have to pass thro' fire to do it. I can never bring myself to enter Ayodhya, the capital of the Ikshwakus, vacant of the glorious presence of my father and brother. Verily, my place is by the side of Rama in the forest depths." The royal servants burst into tears and sobs at the view of the sad brothers thus lamenting in their bereavement. The princes threw themselves on the ground and writhed in their agony like bulls with broken horns, faint, pallid and wan.

Then Vasishtha, the guru and priest of the Ikshwakus, raised Bharata and spoke to him, out of his boundless wisdom (lofty and noble was his spirit, as becomes a knower of Brahman). "Child! It is thirteen days since the envious flames took unto themselves our lord and king. Why delay to perform the Sanchayana and the other remaining funeral rites? Man cannot shun the close embraces of hunger and thirst, grief delusion, old age and death. It behoves you not to grieve so when they contact you."

Sumantra raised up Satrughna and calmed his grief by speaking to him on the origin and dissolution of all

things. Like Indradhwajas looked they, the princes, battered by sun and rain. They wiped their tears and with red eyes of grief followed the kinsmen as they hurried them on, to render the remaining last offices to the king.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

THE PLOTTER'S REWARD.

THEY returned to the royal palace, when the funeral obsequies of Dasaratha had come to an end; and Bharata started to go to where Rama was. Then Satrughna said to him "Brother mine! All beings naturally turn to Rama for shelter and support when grief assails them. It goes without saying, that we have a greater claim on his kindness. I wonder most, why Rama of immeasurable might and the sole refuge of the oppressed and the miserable, allowed himself to be driven to the forest by a weak woman. May I venture to suggest that Rama acted not right in this respect. Perhaps he might have accepted his punishment, afraid of the world's clamour that he set aside his father's word under the stress of ambition. But, what has become of Lakshmana who prides himself upon his strength and valour? What does he fear? He knew right well that Dasaratha perpetrated a foul injustice; what prevented him from quietly ignoring the old king and preventing Rama from being banished to the woods? This is more wonderful than the other. Why did he not punish the wicked king as he deserved, the moment it was plain that he had strayed from the path of virtue and had become a slave to Kaikeyi's infernal charms?" While they were thus conversing,

Majesty, our guide and ruler, has preferred his heavenly mansions to Ayodhya. Rama, his first born and Lakshmana, the prince of mighty arms, have been sent into exile at the instigation of Kaikeyi. One should first seek out a king and then a wife and wealth. Well say the wise, 'The king is our truest benefactor and protector, more than father or mother'. Though bereft of its ruler, the hand of providence keeps away disconduct and sedition from this realm. So, you are our lawful king. You are the first born of His Majesty and stand next in the order of succession. Famous in every way, your people idolise you; everything is ready towards your installation—the prescribed articles, counsellors, merchants and the royal servants. We pray you seat yourself on the glorious throne of your ancestors. Wear the crown nobly and give us peace and prosperity."

But Bharata, ever loyal to Dharma, reverently went round the materials got ready for his coronation, and said to the expectant people, "It is a holy tradition in our race that the eldest son takes the crown. It does not become your loyalty and good sense to speak to me otherwise. Rama came into the world before me and deserves the crown better. Let the army prepare to march forth, for I have decided to make the wild woods my home for twice seven years. I will not rest until I bring back my brother from Dandaka. With these self-same articles of coronation shall I instal him as our king, even in the wild glades of Dandaka where he abides; I will see him brought back to Ayodhya, the great-souled one, even as the priests bring the three fires in holy procession from the sacrificial hall. But never shall I realise the dark hopes of the woman who calls me her son. Rama will rule over your all; the dreary forests are my home henceforth. See to it that

the engineers lay good roads from the capital to the banks of the Ganga; let the guards go with us to assist us in passing over dangerous spots." And as these world fell from his lips, tending to the glory and happiness of Rama, the assembled multitudes cried in joyous acclaim, "The crown is yours to wear by the promise of His Majesty; yet you are dead set on making it over to Rama, the first born of the king; may you be the favorite of the goddess of Fortune for ever."

CHAPTER LXXX.

THE ROAD TO GANGA.

THERE marched in advance experts in the nature of soils, sinkers of wells, diggers of canals, dykes and ditches, miners, builders of boats, canoes, and rafts, navvies, armed convoys, stone-cutters, royal officials, makers of mechanical appliances, carpenters, hewers of wood, sappers and levellers, preparers of lime and brick, gipsies, and woodsmen. These decided to go through their duties as soon as possible, for it would shorten the distance between them and Rama; and marched on to the banks of the Ganga, like the rolling sea when the moon draws her with a mighty force. They travelled in companies and guilds, with spade, axe, crowbar or saw and made a road though the tangled woods, removing the trees, stumps, branches, creepers, saplings and stones from the path. Some planted trees where there were none; some felled down the larger trees with axe, chisel and scythe; some burnt out the deep-rooted useeras; some levelled the rough uneven ground; some filled the ruined wells and deep crevices with earth; some laid bridges over

ravines; some cut channels to drain away the water-logged spots; some pounded fine the stony ground; some transformed shallow pools into lovely tanks adorned with flights of steps; some dug wells and lakes of delicious water where there was before but dry parched earth, with broad steps down which might descend elephants, horses and men to slake their thirst, while shady platforms hard by invited them to rest their wearied limbs. The road by which the army was to travel was strongly built of stone and mortar while lovely trees, heavy with flower and fruit, lined the sides, from whose branches many an intoxicated bird sent forth its sweet melody. It was charming to look at, like the pathway of the gods. Then, in an auspicious star and hour selected by experts in the mysteries of architecture, those that had been deputed to the work pitched the royal tents, at a lovely spot, shady and well-watered and adorned them gaily. Girt round with many a platform of smooth five sand, they resembled mountains inlaid with precious gems. Temples, royal mansions and broad courts grew under their skilled hands, while spacious roads ran among them. Gay flags and proud banners towered aloft. Stately mansions rose to the sky proudly and lent to the encampment the air and grandeur of Amaravati, the metropolis of the Devas or the cars of light that glide softly through the blue empyrean. The royal road, carried by skilled artisans through the dark forests that lined the banks of the Ganga, whose clear waters form the home of countless fish, shone like the clear cloudless sky at night, illumined with the Moon and the constellations.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY.

THE saintly Vasishtha saw to it that the Nandi and other auspicious rites preparatory to a king's installation were gone through that night. At daybreak, bards and minstrels, heralds and pursuivants, panegyrists and chroniclers gathered in the king's ante-chamber, discoursed sweet music, vocal and instrumental and offered sweet praise and deft to Bharata, their future king. The huge drum that announced the watches of the night thundered out its deafening notes under the skilful and vigorous strokes of the golden sticks. Merrily blew the conches and other instruments, high and low, giving forth the various notes of the octaves. The mingled sounds spread far and wide and dealt another wound to the tortured heart of Bharata. He started from his bed and cried out, "These are meet for His Majesty; mistake me not for him, all unworthy as I am. Stop". He turned Satrughna and said "Child! See you the extent of the evil and injustice wrought by Kaikeyi? Law and order have already begun to fail in this kingdom. His Majesty sits happy in his mansion on high, leaving me to bear the varied burden of misery all alone. The goddess of fortune and victory that watches over the destinies of the line of Ikswaku had till now a smooth and happy time of it, when the king on the throne installed his eldest son as heir apparent during his life-time; now, the fair tradition has been violated and she wanders in doubt and distress like a vessel in the heart of the storm with no pilot nor rudder to control it. Rama, our lord, our master and our protector, has been banished the kingdom contrary to the

recognised traditions of our race. And the guardian-deity of this realm roams masterless, seeking for a mate to attach herself to." As the prince thus gave voice to his bitter grief like one demented, the royal ladies and their women took it up and filled the palace with their piteous wails.

Then saint Vasishtha, versed in all that pertains a king and his kingdom, entered the hall of audience that shone like Sudharma, the council chamber of Indra and his troop of disciples with him. The maharshi of boundless wisdom, in whose profound heart the Vedas and their mysteries found a fitting abode, took his seat on a resplendent golden throne covered with rich brocade and said to the attendants: "An important affair of the state is afoot. Go forth and gather here Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, captains. councillors, the trusted servants of his Majesty, Bharata, Satrughna, Vijaya, Sumantra and others that ever are intent on the welfare of Bharata."

Anon, the vast hall resounded to the tumult of chariots, horses, elephants and palanquins that conveyed thither the hurrying crowds. Bharata made his entrance therein and all rose to receive him as they did in the time of Dasaratha, more like the celestials welcoming their lord and master. The spacious hall gleamed like a large lake on the ocean side; saint Vasishtha was the deep waters that ran smooth therein; Bharata and Satrughna were the whales and mighty elephants that disported themselves fearlessly in its depths; the ministers and the generals were the gems and the shells and the sand hills that lined its floor; in short, it recalled the glorious times of Dasaratha.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE MARCH TO THE WOODS.

THE holy sage cast his eye over the vast assembly that were seated as became their rank and station, dressed in robes rich and costly, all eagerly looking forward to the coronation of Bharata. The place blazed as it were with radiance as a clear autumn sky at night inlaid with stars. He called them to order, the officials of the state and the citizens and said to Bharata, " Prince! Dasaratha ruled over this kingdom well and wisely, and had been in consequence raised to the skies where he sits enthroned with the gods. His dying words invested you with the sovereignty of this broad realm, rich in wealth and corn. Rama, whose soul cleaves to the duty of fulfilling the commands of his sire, even as the glory of the sun is ever inseparable from it, has abode by Truth and walked in the steps of the wise; he departed for the woods leaving the kingdom to your care. Gratify the hearts of your subjects by accepting the crown and rule over this kingdom, safe and happy, so willingly bestowed upon you by your father and your brother. Let me see your vassal princes from the east, the south, the west, the north and the islands pour their tribute of gems and gold at your feet."

But, Bharata knew full well that a younger brother violated the traditions of kings if he took the crown while the elder was alive. He would not be the first to tread that path of treason and infamy ; so, he transported himself in thought to Rama's feet and entreated him to come back. The memory filled his eyes with

tears and choked his utterance. Possessed of youth, wealth and power that place within one's reach every joy that life could give, the great-souled prince put them away from him and said to himself, "Wonderful past belief! If one wants to persuade another to do something peculiarly atrocious and wicked, he generally does it in secret. But saint Vasishtha, whose words and counsels direct the footsteps of millions on the path of life, has deemed me so low and abandoned that he does not hesitate to advise me towards this cruel and infamous act in the presence of the millions that inhabit this realm. I shall even take a leaf from his book and, forgetting the reverence and respect due to him, shall upbraid him in the presence of the very same people." He faced the vast andience and cried, "You know full well that I have no other stay, no other support here and hereafter than Rama, in whom I take my refuge. It is supremely virtuous and kindly on your part not to allow me that much privilege and comfort, but to assemble and set your united strength to ruin me. Is this Ayodhya or a howling wilderness infested with thieves and robbers? Is it the loyal and virtuous subjects of Dasaratha, that I see before me, or bands of brigands and highwaymen that have gathered here to rob me in open daylight and in the presence of all men, of that which I hold dearer than life?

"Yon Vasishtha was selected as the high-priest of the race of Ikshwaku that he may bring fame and prosperity to it. His clear vision sees through the past, the present and the future. Doubtless he has the utmost welfare of my line at his heart when he advises me so earnestly to adopt this course of action. Behold! with such a holy and virtuous personage for my spiritual adviser and following carefully his well-considered

advice, do you doubt that I and others of my line would secure to themselves speedily and with ease every good here and hereafter ?

" Rama has duly abode with his teachers and sat at their feet to learn the wisdom of the ages ; he has devoted much thought to the unveiling of their inner mysteries ; he has exemplified in his life everything great and good. Do you give your consent to my usurping the crown that belongs to him by right, I who am guided by the same rules of right and wrong ? Dasaratha quitted his hold on life the very moment when Rama took himself out of his presence ; and I, who have his blood in my veins, shall I dare to rob Rama of his kingdom ?

" Why ! A little thought as to my nature and status will convince you that I am utterly unfit to rule this empire. It belongs to Rama as much as I belong to him. How can one item of his goods pretend to rule another ? If it were possible, this kingdom may as well rule me. There be some in this world who set aside their parents and usurp the throne ; but, never for a moment class me with them. It may occur to you to say 'A gem and the casket that holds it are both the property of the owner ; but, the casket guards the gem'. Here you forget that the casket has been enjoined to guard the gem by the possessor and has been provided with a lock and key to enable it to do so. Rama has not commanded me to look after this kingdom till he should return. A jewel that we wear is placed by us in a case when we have no use for it ; so, if Rama, who should, in all reason, rule over this kingdom himself, does not accede to our earnest prayers and arguments, but entrusts it to me saying 'I have something more important to attend to. Have charge of it till I am free', then, by the might and power he would impart to me, I will watch over this kingdom

as his servant, occupying the position of the box that enshrines the gem.

"So, it behoves us all to exert our utmost to bring him back here. First, let us go to him and disabuse him of the idea that this kingdom is mine, by right of the boons granted to Kaikeyi by His Majesty. The first-born of the late king, superior in every way to all others, the soul of righteousness, the first and best of the monarchs of the race of the sun or the moon, Rama and no other, deserves to sit on the throne of Dasaratha. If I should stoop to this terrible sin favoured by the mean and the wicked, that shuts upon me for ever the gates of paradise, I would earn eternal infamy for the monarchs of the Ikshwaku line that had held sway over this empire without a stain, without a blot, from the days of Manu Vaivasvata. I have no art nor part in the crime of Kaikeyi; I wash my hands of it; my whole nature abhors it. In expiation, I clasp my palms in reverence to Rama who roams in the distant forests. I am resolved to bring him back wherever he might be. I challenge any one to show another as worthy to be the ruler of the three worlds".

His noble words, consonant with justice and truth, sank deep into the hearts of the assembled multitude and drew them with irresistible force to the feet of Rama, while tears of joy coursed down their cheeks. Bharata continued: "If I find it impossible to persuade Rama to turn his steps back to Ayodhya, I will abide in the woods with the noble Lakshmana whose heart never fails in respect and reverence towards his elders. I desire that all here should go with me. In your presence, I will bring him back by any means, even though I should have to resort to strong measures. I have sent before me to clear the path, hired labourers and others

from the villages who work by turns without wages. I follow them forthwith". He turned to Sumantra and said "Let the army prepare to march".

It was done; and the ministers and captains rejoiced to hear that it was decided to journey to the woods to bring back Rama. The wives of the military officers hurried their husbands to start with as little delay as possible. The captains looked to the transport of the troops on horses, chariots and other conveyances. Bharata observed that the army was ready for the march; he took respectful leave of Vasishtha and directed Sumantra, to bring round his chariot, which was done.

"Sumantra!" said he "It shall be my care to see that Rama is soon back among us if my entreaties could effect it. The whole world shall rejoice in peace and prosperity when I restore Rama to Ayodhya. Let it be known to the captains and the troops that they march with me to the woods."

The trusted counsellor gladly communicated the orders of Bharata to the officials of the state, the captains and the friends of the king; and palace and mansion presented a busy sight thro' the hours of the night while Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras bustled about to get ready everything towards the long journey—noble elephants, horses, camels, mules, chariots, with every comfort and luxury.

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

TO THE BANKS OF THE GANGA.

BHARATA woke before the break of day and, all in haste to see Rama, travelled fast in his chariot drawn by fleet coursers. The ministers and the priests preceded him in cars resplendent as the rising

sun. The troops followed behind on nine thousand elephants, sixty thousand chariots and a hundred thousand horses, gaily caparisoned. Kaikeyi, Sumitra and Kausalya went with them in litters, overjoyed at the thought of bringing back Rama. Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas joined the cavalcade embracing one another in their joy and exclaiming " The creatures parched by the summer's heat could never tear themselves away from the welcome clouds, though they are far away from them; the very sight relieves them of all pain, of all misery; even so, those whose hearts are drawn towards Rama would never bear to be away from his presence though they saw him not before. The very sight of him chases away all ills of body, mind or spirit. Of mighty arms reaching down below his knees, strong and muscular as the trunk of an elephant, he grants to his devoted followers the supreme privilege of beholding his divine beauty; his heart is ever the same towards them even when they turn against him. He is never known to fail in his promise of protection to those that seek shelter of him, though there stand in the way his nearest and dearest friends. We have but to bless our eyes with a sight of his fair face to forget for ever the misery and the suffering that the cruel words of Kaikeyi has caused us. How is it possible for sorrow to be still with us, when we have gained the presence of him, who puts away sorrow and sin from all beings? He need not take the trouble of telling us in so many words 'Grieve not'; he need not smile upon us with inaffable kindness; no need for him to speak to us words of affection and love, with looks of sweet compassion. There is nothing left for us to do. The moment we behold him from a distance, our sorrows will vanish as surely as the rising sun dispels the darkness of the world."

Further, of the citizens of Ayodhya, there went with that army, the dependants of Rama, merchants, gem-cutters, potters, weavers, forgers of weapons, makers of fans and umbrellas with peacock's feathers, sawyers, planers of walls and platforms covered with ivory, borers of wood and gems, fashioners of statues, seats, palanquins and other articles out of ivory, plasterers, perfumers, goldsmiths, carpet-cleaners, attendants at bath, shampooers, fumigators, distillers of liquors and essences, washermen, tailors, heads of villages and ranches, professors of song and dance with their women, pupils, and fishermen.

Brahmanas skilled in the exposition of the Vedas and Yogis followed the army in chariots drawn by stately bulls. All clad in gorgeous robes and decked with lovely ornaments, their limbs shining with fragrant pastes and perfumes, they journeyed after Bharata, rejoiced to take part in the glorious return of Rama to Ayodhya.

Far, far they travelled until they drew near Sringiberapura, on the banks of the Ganga. It was there that Guha, the dear friend of Rama, rules over the Nishadas well and wisely. He is ever on the watch to prevent any that might harbour evil designs of Rama. Bharata reached the banks of the Ganga on whose broad bosom disport the chakravakas and said to his ministers, "Let the army camp where it suits them. We shall rest here to-day and resume our journey to-morrow. I would offer libations of water in this holy river to my lamented father in heaven." The ministers and generals looked to it that the army pitched their tents in the most convenient places as became their rank, station, caste and habits. And Bharata abode there for the night, all intent upon bringing back Rama.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

BHARATA AND GUHA.

THE mighty host of Kosala's king encamped far and wide on the banks of the Ganga, caught the attention of Guha who turned to his kinsmen and said, "This army is approaching Sringiberapura, countless as the sands of the ocean and irresistible as its billows. There I see a huge chariot from which towers aloft the Kovidara (ebony) flag. So, it must be Bharata the sinful wretch, who, not content with having banished Rama into cruel exile, has followed him to work some deeper woe. He may plan our capture or death; or it may be that he is after Rama with the boundless hatred of a wicked brother and a rival, saying to himself, 'If it should betide that Rama comes back after fourteen years, my throne will be endangered. So, it is safer and easier to slay him when he is in the forests, alone and defenceless'. Why, is he not the son of Kaikeyi? Doubtless he has come to rob my Rama of everything—wealth, power, dignity and life, of Rama than whom none other deserves to lord it over the worlds. Well, he will not find it so easy as he thinks. Rama is my king, my master, my protector, the friend of my heart; and I enjoin it upon you to watch in arms arrayed on the banks of Ganga, to see that no harm befalls Rama. Our hunters shall keep watch over the fords in boats filled with our troops, amply provisioned with meat, fruits and roots. Let a hundred fishers man every one of our five hundred boats, young, strong and skilled in arms, and spread themselves along the river. If Bharata goes to Rama in all kindness and reverence, free from guilty thought, allow his army to cross the Ganga

unmolested; if it be otherwise, not one of them shall cross the never or go back to Ayodhya." He next proceeded to where Bharata was, while his attendants bore a varied tribute of fish, meat, dresses of bark and fruits.

Sumantra saw him approach and submitted to Bharata "Here comes Guha the king of the Nishadas. His long life has been spent in the pathless wild of Dandaka and every foot of it is as familiar to him as the palm of his hand. He is one of the best friends of your brother; and he comes to pay you his respects and his kinsmen with him. He knows best where Rama and Lakshmana abide; so you will do well to see him." Bharata was overjoyed to hear it and ordered him to be admitted at once.

Guha and his people approached Bharata, saluted him respectfully and said: "These regions be the gardens of your palace. I knew that a road was laid as far as the Ganga; but as I had no orders from you about your journey here, I was not prepared for it and I am sorry I cannot welcome you as I would. We are yours to command, and you can make yourself at home here. My men have brought you fruits, roots, fresh meat, dried flesh and other woodland produce. I humbly submit that you accept them and stay here to-night with your troops, resuming your journey by daybreak."

CHAPTER LXXXV.

GUHA'S DOUBTS DISPELLED.

AND Bharata gave meet reply, "Dear friend of Sree Rama, my master and guru! My troops are very numerous and you have no one to assist you.

Yet, you would entertain them hospitably. Well, I take the will for the deed and am as pleased." His noble heart rejoiced at having met Guha and at the very kind welcome he offered him; he almost imagined his heart-hopes fulfilled. "Let be," he cried, "show me the way to the hermitage of Maharshi Bharadvaja. I take it that travelling through the swamps and marshes along the banks of the Ganga is no child's play."

But Guha, who was born and bred in those woods, hastened to assure him. "I and my hunters go with you armed; so you need not waste a thought on the difficulties of the road you have to travel along. But, the sight of this vast army fills me with dread and suspicion. Do you call yourself a friend to Rama or an enemy? No one fears him; then, why this countless army?" He clasped earnest hands of appeal to emphasise his humble request. But there was not the slightest necessity for Guha to suspect Bharata. The pure Akasa is not defiled in the least by the dirt we may throw at it; we but soil our hands thereby. Even so, Bharata, whose pure soul was filled with utmost devotion to Rama, felt not a shadow of anger at Guha who doubted him, all causelessly. "Grant me," said he, "the favor that the time may never come for your suspicions about me to be realised. You do but ill to doubt me. Rama is my elder brother; he is as a father to me. I go to take him back to Ayodhya where his crown and his countless mllions await his arrival. Mistake me not. I speak the truth".

Guha's face shone with joy as he exclaimed: "Lord! so you have decided to forego the crown that came to you unasked and without any effort on your part. You stand alone in the world and unparalleled for altruism and magnaminity. Perfect you are, any way I take you,

Eternal fame is yours, in all the worlds, if you succeed in persuading Rama to take the crown back." And upon them thus conversing the sun went down.

They camped there that night; and a woeful night it was for Bharata. Born in the lap of luxury and comfort, a stranger to sorrow and suffering, utterly unmeet to experience either, he was all guiltless of anything that might entail upon him such misery. Filled with boundless devotion to Rama, and possessed of a courage and fortitude that no danger nor adversity could weaken, yet he was in the mighty grip of some affliction that defied speech and thought. Rama occupied his mind, his heart; and his soul and his whole being blazed with a quenchless fire when he dwelt upon the injustice and harm that his brother had at his hands, even as a forest tree glows at its heart with an invisible fire. Perspiration ran from his body scorched with grief, even as the burning rays of the sun melt the Himalayan snow into roaring torrents. Separation from the side of Rama was like unto a lofty mountain; the ceaseless flow of thought about him formed the rocks that made it up; the varied sighs are the veins of gold and silver that ran through it; the paralysed senses are the inanimate trees that covered it; grief and weariness were its peaks; the frequent fits of unconsciousness were the cruel beasts that roamed through its forests; its fiery energy was the dense bamboo groves that lined its sides. And as an elephant separated from his herd, Bharata suffered in speechless agony, his sorrow-laden heart heaving grievous sighs, fainting oft and more than once on the brink of death.

Then, he naturally repaired with his attendants to where Guha lay, who, grieved to see him grieve, set about to console him.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

GUHA'S NARRATIVE.

Now that Guha had probed Bharata's faultless heart to its very depths, he took a real pleasure in descanting on the unique devotion of Lakshmana to Rama, on the service he was rendering him and on his manifold excellences. Numerous beyond count were the virtues of Rama, the hero of Guha's discourse; one might as well hope to stem the oceans with his palms. Bharata, the listener, was well qualified to be the master of such as Guha. The narrator was one whose long life was spent in the trackless forests that knew not civilised man and his graces. So, he spoke on the Lord and His infinite perfections as well as his intellect and speech could compass. Who can dare hope to exhaust them? There is no grade nor distinction of the old and the new, of the Nestor and the novice in describing the glories of the Lord. It is but the Great Teachers that are qualified to initiate us into the mysteries of the Unknowable; it is but those of earnest soul and eager heart that are permitted to pass beyond the veil and sit at their holy feet. But, Guha desired, if possible, to deepen Bharata's love and devotion to Rama; and he began to expatiate on the goodly virtues of Lakshmana as a fitting example.

"I observed that Lakshmana, out of his extreme love and devotion, kept awake to guard Rama and my heart was much pained thereat. 'Child!' said I 'here is a bed ready for you, soft and comfortable. Rest your weary limbs on it for a while. It comes natural to me and easy, and to my fellow-hunters too here, to keep awake all night and rough it in these woods; all my

days have been spent here. You can trust me to keep guard over Rama and Seeta. You have been gently brought up and delicately; and this is no work for such as you. The worlds hold no dearer object to me than Rama. I speak the veriest truth and, if you so desire, would swear it by the God of truth himself. I have placed all my hopes on him to secure unparalleled fame, virtue and wealth in this world, all thro' his grace. I, and my kin will stand guard over Rama and Seeta, dearer to me than life, through the long hours of the night, with shaft on the string. What I know not about these forests is not worth knowing, for my life has been spent in it. I, my kin and my troops are more than a match for any enemies that might come against us in armed array.'

" 'No talk of fear' replied Lakshmana 'when *you* look after our safety; your soul is ever wedded to righteousness. Concern yourself not for me. How could you expect me to sleep when my lord and his gentle consort lie on the rough bare earth? I care not to waste a thought on my body, my life or its comforts. Gods and asuras may join hands and yet be swept away, like a withered leaf before a gale, by a poor shaft from the terrible bow of my brother. And that hero sleeps all comfortably on the bare ground, on rough grass and Seeta with him; what a terrible sight that!

" 'Long years did the king recite the Gayatri and other mighty mantras to be blessed with Rama as his son; long and all faithfully did he keep, with well-restrained senses, the vows and observances, kricchra, chandrayana and others too severe to think of. Times out of number did he celebrate yagnas, yagas and other rites, which the Holy Books enjoin on a barren father. After much trouble and travail, a noble boy was born to

him, his other self as it were, after sixty thousand years of heart-ache. And the fond father has at last driven his precious child away to the dreary forests. Is it in human nature to survive the shock? I hope not. There is not the slightest shadow of a doubt that the Goddess of earth is widowed of her lord and helpless. The ladies of the harem would, by now, have cried themselves hoarse over us and sleep the sleep of exhaustion and unconsciousness. Utter quiet, ominous and terrible, keeps watch over them.

" 'Kausalya, my mother, the other royal ladies and my father would, ere now, have departed for the mansions of the Blessed. At the worst, they would not survive this night. Perhaps my mother may hold on to life, to behold her favorite child Satrughna once again. But Kausalya, the mother of that prince of heroes, would *never* survive her son's departure to the woods. The very thought tortures me past bearing. Every one at Ayodhya, the joy and pride of the world, every one, man, woman and child, was extremely devoted to king Dasaratha; and if they were to hear that he had departed this life, wailing and moaning, they would not lose a moment in following him wherever he might be. Rama is the first born of our monarch. All graces and excellences vie with one another to find a place in him; he lies nearer the heart of our father than any of us; the fond father cannot keep his life currents in his body if he is away from Rama for a minute. It needs no saying that Kausalya, his faithful wife, would ever be by his side in this world or in the next. And you may be sure to find her friend Sumitra, my mother, ever in loving attendance upon her. 'I have been blessed with this priceless jewel of a boy after sixty thousand years of barrenness; he has grown to youth and

manhood, safe and happy; he is mated to a lady in every way worthy of him; I can safely lay the burden of the state on his shoulders and spend the evening of my life in ease and comfort'—such golden dreams have been rudely shattered and for him life contains nothing to hold him back from the welcome arms of death. Poor soul! He has not the consolation of at least hoping to see his son crowned after him at the end of fourteen years; cruel grief will not spare him so long. Happy are they who remain with him during his last moments and render him every attention, every service possible; alas! *we* are denied that blessing.

"'Ah! does the broad earth hold another city as beautiful and resplendent as Ayodhya? Heavy grief weighs down my heart when I recall the well-laid crossings, the straight and beautiful roads, the mansions of the rich, the palaces of the princes and the groves, gardens, conservatories and pleasaunces. High bred courtesans flash through its streets like visions of beauty; stately chariots, fleet coursers and huge elephants throng the ways; gay sounds and solemn, gentle lay or martial music, rise upon the air on every side; troops of men and women, strangers to disease and sorrow and gaily attired, lend an additional charm to the city; the splendour and pomp of the festivals and the holy fanes; the scenes of gaiety and joy in private houses—supremely blessed are they to whom it is given to dwell in that fair city, the favorite abode of everything that goes to make life happy and content. Think you that Dasaratha would keep his hold on life till we return from our exile? Think you we would be fortunate enough to touch the feet of the Great One? Think you that we would enter the portals of Ayodhya after our sojourn in the forest

as my brother has vowed, safe and happy, our sire's promise well kept ?'

"And on him so lamenting dawned a new day. Then Rama and Lakshmana matted their hair as became the hermits of the forest. My people saw to it that they crossed the Ganga safely on a very comfortable large; and I watched them pass on towards the woods, armed and alert, their keen looks taking in every detail on their way."

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

GUHA'S NARRATIVE (CONTD.)

THE moving account overcame Bharata quite and he sank where he sat, in a fit of hopeless despondency. Brought up in the utmost luxury and comfort, endowed by nature with measureless strength, with mighty chest and shoulders, like those of the monarch of the forests, with long and powerful arms that reach below his knees, with large and lustrous eyes, like the petals of a fresh-blown lotus, in the prime of youth and health, adorned with every grace of form and feature, he was the very last man one would associate with such a fate. He consoled himself somewhat; but the memory of Rama and his pitiable plight came back to him stronger than ever, and he fell down even as a lordly elephant pierced to the heart by the sharp goad. Satrughna sprang forward, raised him up tenderly and sobbed aloud, unable to bear the heart-rending sight. The cry drew to the spot the royal ladies who beheld Bharata, lean and emaciated with fasting and distress, lying on the ground with his brother tending him affectionately; what could they do but

gather round him and raise their voices in deep lamentation? Kausalya, bereft of her husband and her only son, ran towards him with outwelling tenderness, even as a cow rushes towards its favourite calf, clasped Bharata to her breast, while the floodgates of her heavy sorrow burst uncontrolled, and cried, "Poor child! I see your body consumed with the fierce flames of grief consequent on being separated from Rama. Verily, Rama would ill-deserve his name if the sight of your suffering moves him not to return to Ayodhya at once. But should he ever hear that you have quitted your hold on life, little chance have we of seeing him again. I look upon your face and keep my life within me after my Rama had exiled himself to the woods and Lakshmana with him. May be you have heard some untoward news of Lakshmana. Or, am I destined to be tortured yet further with the dreadful news of some dire misfortune that has befallen my only son Rama, who abandoned me, feeble and helpless, and betook himself to the forests with his wife?"

It was now Bharata's turn to comfort the queen; he turned to Guha and cried through his blinding tears, "My brother, where slept he that night? Where reclined Seeta? Where did Lakshmana make his bed? What rough make-shifts served them for a couch? What stayed their hunger?" Guha was glad to be given a chance to speak of his idol, Rama; he proceeded to describe how Rama came to where he was and received the warmest of welcomes. "Dainty food prepared variously, cakes, meats, fruits and roots were got ready for him. But he would have none of them. 'Nay' said he 'I come of the race of Kshatriyas who give but never take. Your kindness and solicitude has pleased me more than I could express. You will oblige me by taking

these away.' He drank of the pure water of the Ganga that Lakshmana fetched for him and went through his evening orisons in silence. The noble couple took their seats on a bed of sacred kusa grass that the faithful son of Sumitra had spread for them, who then washed their feet and retired. Here, under this Ingudi tree, slept they; and here are the remains of their lowly bed of grass. Lakshmana kept armed watch the live-long night, going his rounds as regularly and fearlessly as the most seasoned soldier on duty. But my love of Rama made me suspect the movements of the devoted prince. For, one of his brothers, as I said to myself, drove him to the wild woods; and another that followed him, who can say what he might do to Rama as he lay sleeping the sleep of peace and exhaustion? So I and my kinsmen, armed to the teeth, followed Lakshmana wherever he went, apparently to keep the wild beasts away from the sleeping pair. But we did him the cruellest injustice to doubt his loyalty and might have spared ourselves the trouble of watching. Why, who is there, in all the worlds, that dare raise his eyes to Rama in treachery or evil, mighty and puissant as the Ruler of the Immortals?"

CHAPTER LXXXVIII.

BHARATA'S LAMENT.

BHARATA and his ministers listened to him with eager attention and proceeding to the foot of the Ingudi tree, beheld the rude beds on which Rama and Lakshmana spent the night. Bharata turned to the royal ladies and said, "The great-souled Rama slept that night even here. Lo! the marks

where his limbs have pressed down the grass. The world boasts not of a purer and nobler lineage than that to which Dasaratha belonged; he towered aloft over all others in intellect, wealth and power. Who would ever predict such a miserable fate for the son of that mighty emperor? How did he bring himself to stretch his limbs on the bare ground, he who has been accustomed all his life to recline on couches and divans splendidly upholstered? The walls and floors of his rooms, built on high terraces in summer and under the ground in winter, are inlaid with gold and silver; carpets and rugs of rare and exquisite workmanship cover the ground. Costly exotics and rare flowers carefully grown, meet us at every turn. The air is heavy with the perfumes of sandal, aloes, and other fragrant substances. Birds of varied hue and lovely plumage sing sweetly all the while. Experts in dance and song ever await his pleasure. From a distance they look very like the peaks of mount Meru or a fleet of air-ships or a bank of white clouds. Cool in summer, warm and snug in winter, the the sleeping apartments of Rama leave nothing to desire. The sweet strains from the golden-throated singers and the ordered music of Veena, drum, or tabor fall softly on the waking ears, while the eyes of the sleeper open upon lovely visions of apsaras—like girls dancing in mazy evolutions. Women flit here and there like glimpses of paradise, filling the rooms with the sweet chimes of the gold and silver bells attached to their anklets, girdles or bracelets. Bards and minstrels, heralds and panegyrists awaken Rama with apt and ingenious praise. Some proclaim his lofty titles; some call the people to order and attention; some describe in noble stanzas the wonderful deeds and famous exploits of the kings of the Ikshwaku race. And Rama

used all his life to be called back to the work-a-day-world and its cares by the sweet concord of sounds, did he really sleep here on the bare earth, rough and rugged with stone and thorn, exposed to wind and rain, cold and snow, while the howls and cries of the beasts of the forest pierced the ear in wild clamour?

"Let be. Could any one believe, though he had the evidence of his senses for it, that Seeta slept here on the flinty earth, and she, the daughter of king Janaka, the daughter-in-law to the emperor Dasaratha and the wife of Sree Rama, dearer to him than his very life? My wits are dull and clouded; or is it all a hideous dream? Verily Time is mightier than Providence; if not, would such things ever come to happen? Of a truth, this is the bed slept in by my revered brother; I see where it has been disturbed by him as he rolled on his sleep thro' fatigue and exhaustion. The kusa grass is pressed down in those places more heavily towards the hard ground. It seems that Seeta has slept without taking off her ornaments, may be, overcome with the weariness of the journey. See the minute grains of gold that have fallen off them. She must have spread her upper garment here; the kusa grass has detached some silken threads from it. I think her husband's bed is ever the softest and the most luxurious to a faithful wife. Behold the daughter of king Janaka, yet in her teens, born in comfort and luxury, a stranger to sorrow and suffering, has slept most soundly on this rude couch. Alas! the worlds harbour no greater monster than I, utterly callous and cruel-hearted. Was it not my hand that drove them to sleep on the bare earth like miserable outcasts? Born to the emperor Dasaratha whose commands are upon the heads and eyes of kings, adored and worshipped by every one

under the sun, dearer than life to every being, with lovely eyes of dark-red, even like the kalhara flower, more beautiful by far than the God of love, he was accustomed to pomp and power, wealth and luxury and knew not, even in his dreams, what pain and affliction was; yet, has it not been his untoward fate to renounce his broad realm and its countless joys and pleasures, to walk the woods and seek repose on the bare rugged earth?

"Blessed above compare is Lakshmana to be allowed to be with Rama and Seeta and render them every service, when such misfortunes overtook them. But, who can gauge what merit Janaki has laid by in former births, to fight successfully for the privilege of accompanying Rama to the gloomy forests and share his dangers and difficulties with him?

"I do not think for a moment that we could achieve our aims of life without that great One to guide us. Dasaratha has gone back to heaven; Rama roams the forests; the wide world looks dull and empty without these heroes. Though Rama abide in the woods, this kingdom is protected by his prowess and fame. Why, no enemy ever dreams of raising his eyes to Kosala even when it is without a king to rule over it. Walls, towers and battlements there are none; elephants and horses wander aimlessly about, since their grooms have sunk in stupid torpor; the gates of the town are ever open; there is no one, no provision to prevent the foe from entering it; the army is broken-hearted and utterly unconscious of their duty to watch over the safety of Ayodhya; there are no patrols, no outposts to announce the approach of the enemy; yet, it is most wonderful that none dare approach it with hostile intent but carefully shun it in its deplorable helpless condition, like poisoned cakes.

"From this day, I put on the garb of hermits; I clad myself in deerskin and dress of bark; I mat my hair and stretch myself on the bare earth, fruits and roots my only fare. It is but meet penance to expiate my sin, who was the head and front of all this evil. Dasaratha's word shall not be falsified. *I* will abide in the woods for fourteen years in the place of Rama; *he* shall rule over Kosala in my place. Is it not enough if someone of his sons should fulfil the promise of Dasaratha? It matters not whether Rama does it or I for him. Satrughna shall accompany me in my happy exile; Lakshmana shall wait on Rama at Ayodhya. Ye powers on high! grant me this prayer of mine that the brahmanas crown Rama at Ayodhya. I will throw myself at the feet of my brother and entreat him diversely. If, in spite of all I can do, he chooses to stay in the woods, why, my place is by him. I am his brother, his disciple, his slave; let me see whether he has the heart to cast me forth from him."

CHAPTER LXXXIX.

BHARATA CROSSES THE GANGA.

THEY spent that night on the banks of the Ganga. Bharata awoke before day-dawn and called out to Satrughna that lay near. "Still asleep? Arise, awake. Bring Guha to me as soon as you can. Our army should cross the noble river." To which Satrughna, "Brother! sleep for me! I but keep awake, my thoughts centred on that Great One, who is never away from your heart." And to them thus conversing came Guha and said with low reverence, "Lord! I hope you had a sound sleep and happy dreams last

night. Is it all well with Your Majesties and the troops?" Bharata, the foremost of those devoted to Rama, hastened to reply to the affectionate enquiries of Guha and said, "Thanks to your kindness and consideration, we and our troops spent a happy night here. Now, it is time we crossed the river. May I hope that you and your servants will see to the necessary arrangements."

Guha repaired to his city and called to his kinsmen, "Awake, bestir yourselves to bring here the boats and the barges. The king's troops cross the river." They made ready, in a trice, five hundred boats. Small they were; but there were others named Swastika from their being built like the ansated cross. They were made up of two ordinary boats joined together; large bells were hung at the corners; they were gay with flags and bright with gold; lovely windows in the wooden walls gave plenty of air and light. They were rain and storm proof and allowed as much breeze and light as was pleasant and enough. Made to accommodate and convey royalty, they were firmly joined by nails and clamps. Guha chose the best of them for Bharata and his people to cross the river. Costly rugs and carpets, white as snow and soft as down, covered the floor. Tiny bells were skillfully hung all over, chiming sweet melody as the barge moved.

Bharata, Satrughna, Kausalya, Sumitra and the royal ladies got in, preceeded by the priests, the chaplains and other brahmanas. Next followed the transport of conveyances and provisions. It is a custom with the troops to set fire to their camps when striking them, in the belief that it would bring them good. The fords were filled with men who fought for the first chance to cross the river. It was one vast clamour and confusion

all around. "This is my trunk; this is my bed; this is my luggage; these are my vessels" rose on every side. The deafening noise rose high as the officers hurried them on. The sails were set in the boats to catch the favourable breeze. The servants of Guha had a busy time of it, transporting the huge army across the river. Some of the boats were reserved for women, some for horses, some for conveyances, others for the cattle. On their return, the boatmen showed their skill by executing many wonderful evolutions with their empty craft. The many-decked boats resembled huge elephants with howdahs on them or walking mountains waving with flags. Many crossed the river on canoes, rafts, pots or by swmiming.

The countless hosts were transported in an incredibly short time and marched.on towards the woods of Prayaga at the auspicious muhoorta Maitra. Bharata, as became a wise and skilful king, whose heart is ever concerned about the welfare of his subject, forgot his sorrow and fatigue, went among the troops and made kind and earnest enquiries, saying, "You had a long and weary march this day, I fear." He encamped them in a pleasant spot and comfortable and proceeded on foot to pay his respects to Maharshi Bharadvaja, old in years, wisdom and tapas, while Vasishtha and the priests led the way. Soon they drew near the asrama of that holy Brahmana, the preceptor of the Devas and deeply skilled in the inner mysteries of the Vedas and beheld a lovely cottage peeping from among the groves that almost hid it from view.

CHAPTER XC.

BHARATA AND BHARADVAJA.

HE stopped his attendants when he was about two miles from it, divested himself of his court dress and weapons and took his way to the saint's abode with his councillors, Vasishtha leading the way. When they came within sight, the prince stopped his suite and walked on with his guru, for he was carefully trained in the traditions of the line of Raghu. Bharadvaja arose at the sight of Vasishtha and directed his disciples to fetch the Arghya. The two rishis were atmost of the same age and, as such, they simply welcomed each other without prostrations. Bharata went round the sage in deep reverence and touched his feet. He followed Vasishtha and hence was a scion of the race of Ikshwaku and a son of Dasaratha. The usual hospitality offered and accepted—water to clean the hands and feet, fruits and roots—the host made kindly enquries about the people of Ayodhya, the army, the treasure, the friends and the ministers of the king. He was aware of the demise of Dasaratha and omitted all reference to it. Then Vasishtha and Bharata enquired in return of his health, the holy Fires, the disciples and the birds, beasts and trees in his asrama. Bharadvaja made suitable reply and, impelled by his love to Rama, said to Bharata "I understood that you are now ruling at Ayodhya. Your presence here causes me a grave doubt. Lady Kausalya was the happy mother of a son of mighty arms, the joy of all the worlds; and him did Dasaratha consign to a gloomy exile in the woods for fourteen years, all at the word of a woman. Rama cheerfully obeyed the mandates of his sire; Seeta

and Lakshmana elected to accompany him. Are you come here to work any evil to poor innocent Lakshmana, spurred by your ambition to enjoy, without a rival, the crown that belongs to Rama by every right, human and divine ?"

Tears welled from his eyes and choked his utterance as Bharata cried, "Alas ! I am lost. What hope for my wretched self, if I should be condemned out of the mouth of your holy self, for whom Time holds no secrets, past, present and future ? No one shall be any the worse for me. I pray you will not speak of me in this wise. But you might say, 'It is all one whether your are guilty or your mother'. I should not be held responsible for what my mother said or did in my absence ; it pleases me not ; it has not my sanction or approval. I am come here to anyhow entreat Rama to return to Ayodhya, and earn the privilege of serving him ever. I pray your reverence take pity on me and inform me of the present whereabouts of His Majesty Ramachandra".

His request was warmly backed by Vasishtha and many others, whereupon Bharadvaja said to the noble prince, "A scion of the line of Raghu, you do well to follow the traditions of the great, to wean your heart away from the pleasures and joys of a royal life, to keep your rebellious senses under stern control and to abide by the commands of the Holy Ones. My open vision reads your character and thoughts aright ; but I spoke to you thus, to deepen your devotion to Rama and enhance your fame as one who loves him best. Your noble brother resides hard by at mount Chitrakoota and with him Seeta and Lakshmana. You wlll see him to-morrow. Rest here to-day, you and your ministers. Generous-hearted prince, from whom none went away

disappointed! gratify my wish". Bharata accepted the kind invitation and made the necessary arrangements for himself, his retinue and his troops to stay at the hermitage of the saint.

CHAPTER XCI.

BHARADVAJA'S FEAST.

WHEN Bharata had signified his consent to accept his hospitality, the sage said to him, "Child! I would have you and your people dine with me". And to him Bharata, "Holy Sir! I am delighted, beyond measure, more than if I were royally entertained by you, by your kind hospitality to me with whatever your hermitage can afford." Bharadvaja smiled gently as he said to himself "Bharata thinks that it is cruel to trouble me, a poor hermit living in the forests. He knows not what I can do." "Full well do I know," said he aloud "your devotion to me and the pleasure you derive from my poor hospitality. Kindly understand that I desire to give a feast to your retinue and troops. It behaves you to accept kindly what I offer in all love. Why have you kept your troops far away?" "I know" replied Bharata "that a king or a prince does ill to approach with his retinue and troops the hermitages of the holy rishis. It might interfere with their devout meditations. I came here all alone, fearing to displease your reverence. Maddened elephants, horses, chariots, infantry and camp-followers spread through the woods in countless numbers. Incalculable damage might ensue to the fords, the cottages and to the trees, birds and beasts that are attached to the holy spots. So I but did right to leave them at a distance". "Nay, nay" said

the sage "Let it not concern you any way. Lead them all here." Then Bharata sent for his ministers and bade them brings his attendants and troops to the asrama of Bharadvaja. Thereafter the Maharshi entered the fire-chamber where the gods had their places; he sipped water thrice, wiped his face twice, touched his head, eye, nose, ears and the heart and called upon Visvakarma to help him give a feast to Bharata and his hosts. "I call upon Visvakarman and Maya, the architects of the gods and asuras. I would give a feast to prince Bharata and the troops that have come with him. Make the necessary arrangements towards it. I call upon Indra, Yama, Varuna, and Kubera, the regents of the worlds, as also Agni and the other Shinnig Ones, to assist me in offering due hospitality to Bharata. Let the Naiads in all the worlds come here, the guardian spirits of the rivers flowing east and of those flowing west; let some of the streams run with the drink Maireya; let some run with wine; let others run with cool water sweet as the juice of sugar-cane. I call down here Haha, Huhu, Viṣvavasu and the other gandharvas; the apsarasas that claim descent from the gods and the gandharvas; Ghritachi, Visvachi, Misrakesi, Alambusa, Nagadanta, Hema and Swayamprabha whose home is in the mansion built for her by Maya in the cave of Mount Mahendra; Rambha, Urvasi, Menaka and the other nymphs that wait upon Indra; the apsarasas that abide in the heaven of Brahma; and Tumburu their master of music and dancing, with all the necessary accompaniments. I invoke Kubera, the Guardian of the north, to send me here the forest of Chaitraratha in the land of Uttarakuru, with its leaves of robes and ornaments such as the celestials affect its and fruits of celestial nymphs. Let Chandra, the presiding deity over the

plants and herbs of mystic virtue, prepare enough of dainty food and varied dishes, sour, pungent, astringent, sweet, saline and bitter; wreaths of diverse shades and perfumes just dropped from trees; and infinite variety of meats and drinks". And Bharadvaja of boundless yogic might, wisdom and spiritual lustre, recited the mantras that invoke the respective Powers, with due rythm and rites.

He faced the east with clasped hands and sent forth his thought, when, lo! the mighty Presences were there, one by one. A cool breeze and pleasant blew over the place, laden with the fragrance of the mounts Malaya and Mandara, the home of the sandalwood. It chased away heat, sweat and languor from the body and left behind it an indescribable sense of bliss. Flowers of heaven rained thick upon the place; the celestial orchestra thundered overhead; the choristers of Indra's court discoursed sweet music, vocal and instrumental; apsarasas glided about in mazy evolutions of dance. These strains, in perfect pitch and time, sent streams of exquisite joy though the ears and hearts of all beings in the three worlds. When the sounds died away, the troops of Bharata witnessed the marvellous might of Visvakarman. For a distance of five yojanas the ground was levelled smooth and carpeted with soft green grass, as if inlaid with gems of varied hue. Mango jack, pine-apple, wood-apple, amalaka (myrabolam) and other trees sprang up in ordered confusion. From the Uttarakuru there came down the garden Chaitraratha with heavenly delights. Countless rivers and streams were present, lined with beautiful trees. Royal quarters, palaces, mansions, pleasure-houses, kiosks, storied buildings splendidly fitted, spacious courts enclosed by lofty corridors, stables for elephants, horses,

mules and cattle, and garages for every kind of conveyance, rose on every side. The palace designed for Bharata was tastefully adorned with arches, garlands, flags, couches, divans, and seats upholstered in silk and brocade, while priceless rugs and carpets covered the floor. Gorgeous robes, meats, drinks, confections, essences, extracts, preserves, perfumes and rare and costly articles of *vertu* met the eye in every side. With the gracious permission of the Maharshi, Bharata made his entry into the palace, flashing with gems and gold. His ministers, priests and attendants entered with him and were struck dumb with surprise and awe at the sights that dawned upon them. They passed on into the hall of audience and beheld a marvellous throne placed in the centre of it,fashioned like the royal seat of the Lord of the celestials, while there stood hard by the snow-white unbrella and chowries with golden handles, gem-studded. Bharata installed on it, in reverent thought, Rama the idol of his heart, went round it at the head of his ministers and bowed himself to the earth over joined palms. He worshipped him mentally and made it plain to all that he was but the humble servant of Ramachandra, by occupying a seat below it reserved for the ministers of state, and waving aloft the royal chowrie. Councillors and ecclesiastical dignitaries seated themselves as became their rank and station. The commander-in-chief, his generals and captains seated themselevs behind them. Then there approached Bharata, in obedience to the orders of Bharadwaja, streams thick with payasa (a preparation of rice with milk and sugar), while the banks were lined with mansions of various styles of architecture, wonderfully plastered.

Next there appeared on the scene twenty thousand apsarasas sent by Brahma, gaily adorned; another

twenty thousand arrived later, resplendent with gold and gems, pearl and coral, the contingent sent by Kubera. The Holy Scriptures declare that any one who falls into their hands goes clean daft; a third troop succeeded them, twenty thousand in number, from Nandana, the garden of Indra. Narada, Tumburu and Gopa, the gandharva kings of blinding glory, made their appearance. Alambusa, Misrakesi, Pundarika, Vamana and other nymphs danced before Bharata, commanded thereto by Bharadvaja. All that is rare and lovely in Chaitraratha and in the heaven-world, transported themselves to Prayaga by his yogic might. The Bilva played on the mridanga while the Tani kept accurate time; the Pippala danced gaily while the Sarala, Tala, Tilaka, and Naktamalaka moved here and there as dwarfs and hunchbacks. The Simsupa, Amalaki, Jambu and other forest trees, the Malati, Mallika, Jaji and other woodland creepers turned themselves into lovely damsels and said to the assembled multitudes, "We are here for you to enjoy us as much as you like. Votaries of the wine cup! just have a taste of these rare liqueurs. Hungry men! have your fill of our payasa and pure meats." Every man of them was taken in charge by seven or eight ladies, who annointed him with rare essences and oils, gave him a fine bath, dressed him in gay apparel and ornaments, massaged his limbs and made him drink on the sly. Elephants, horses, camels, mules and bulls were sumptuously fed with sugar-canes, fried rice mixed with honey and other favorite delicacies by those whom the maharshi deputed to take care of them. The keepers and grooms that followed the army lay in a supremely blissful state of inebriation, and knew nor cared what became of their chargers. The countless hosts of Bharata had enough

and more of enjoying the dainty viands, drinks, garments, ornaments, pastes, perfumes, wreaths and whatelse their hearts craved; apsarasas like lambent lighting among the clouds loaded them with attentions and favors; they lost all self-control and exclaimed in the abandonment of their joy "May all good go with Bharata! Hail Rama! We will not go back to Ayodhya, nor forward to Dandaka. Let our masters please themselves." Foot-soldiers, keepers and grooms clean forgot they had any one over them and roared in wild chorus, transported with what they saw, heard and enjoyed. Some called out "Here, my friends! This is swarga; these are the mansions of the Blessed"; some laughed uproariously all the while, without any visible reason therefor; some sang fitfully; some danced and capered about; some ran hither and thither, decked with wreaths and garlands. They ate until they could eat no more; but their mouth watered when they looked again at the delicous viands, drinks and confections. Servants, retainers, soldiers' wives and camp-followers rejoiced beyond measure at the new and gorgeous garments they were dressed in. Elephants, mules, camels, horses and other birds and beasts brought by the troops for sport knew no bounds to their joy and were so full, thanks to the splendid hospitabity of Bharadvaja, that they turned away with satiety and disgust at the very mention of food. There was no one in that vast multitude, hungry or faint, or dusty or unadorned with garments of spotless white. Great was the wonder of every one at the sight of those white hills of boiled rice decorated with numberless wreaths, mutton, pork, bacon, high-class condiments, fruits preserved in sugar and honey, curious preparations of boiled pulse of various kinds, fragrant extracts and juices. Numerous wells flanked the forest

brimming with payasa. The cows that ranged therein streamed with milk; the trees rained honey. Pools of maireya were surrounded by hillocks of curiously prepared meat of deer, peacock, fowl, geese and other creatures, served steaming hot in huge pots. The ground was covered with innumerable article of dinner-service, all of beaten gold. Millions of goblets, jars, casks, and jugs were filled to overflowing with curds. Large lakes ran over with rasala, some with curds, some with payasa, some with churned whey. Sweet cakes were piled near them, as condiments, to give point to the drinks. Pastes, powders, decoctions, oils, hot water in huge cauldrons invited the passers-by to bathe at the river-fords. Medicated tooth-brushes, pots of sandal, ointments to be used after the bath, bright mirrors, costly robes, ivory clogs, shoes, boots, tiny boxes of collyrium, combs for the hair, the beard, the whiskers and the moustaches, flashing weapons such as are affected by warriors, bows, armour, beds and seats lay neatly arranged in boundless profusion. Spacious tanks full to the brim with sweet crystal water for the elephants, horses and other animals to drink from, when they are fed, were constructed in various places, with broad and comfortable fords leading down to the water. There were other sheets of water clear as the sky and sweet as nectar that tempted the beholders to bathe and disport themselves amidst the lotuses and lilies that carpeted them. Verdant lawns were there, waving with soft and sweet grass for the cattle to graze.

All wondered mightily when they beheld the yogic power of Bharadvaja bring down on earth, in a moment, the rare and numerous elements that contributed to entertain Bharata and his army—marvellous as dream-pictures, baffling all words, all thought and so beautifully

adapted to every one's wants and desires. Like the celestials amusing themselves in Nandana, the garden of heaven, Bharata's retinue and troops spent the night in the maharshi's asrama in a long spell of delight. At last the heavently caterers took respectful leave of the sage—gandharvas, apsarasas, and naiads. But this grand entertainment did not vanish into airy nothing like the magician's glamour. The guests continued to experience, even after the feast, the same sensations of pleasure and delight that they felt during it—the full-fed epicures, the determined heroes that never turned their backs upon Bacchus as long as there was a spark of intelligence in them, the peripatetic repositories of fragrant pastes and rare perfumes, and the living trees hid beneath sweet-scented wreaths and garlands. The earth was strewed far and near with flowers.

CHAPTER XCII.

BHARATA JOURNEYS TO CHITRAKOOTA.

BHARADVAJA enabled prince Bharata and his people to pass a happy night, thanks to his considerate courtesy and noble hospitality. Next morning Bharata was up and moving before the dawn, and proceeded to the sage's abode to gain information as to the present quarters of Rama. Meanwhile, the maharshi had finished his matin devotions and started to the royal camp, desirous to pay a visit to the ladies of Dasaratha. The prince saluted him with clasped palms and stood waiting to be spoken to. Bharadvaja saw into his soul and found it filled with utter purity and love to Rama; it was not affected in the least by the gorgeous

hospitality of the night. Rama and Rama alone occupied it, waking or sleeping. So the sage said to him out of a pleased heart, "Child! Had you and yours a pleasant time of it last night at my asrama? I am but a poor hermit, after all; I hope you will take the will for the deed and forget anything that might have been amiss or defective."

Whereat, Bharata rendered reverent reply: "Holy One! I and mine have been honored, I fear, far more than we deserve. Our wildest wishes have been anticipated to their utmost. Lodged in mansions that put to shame the palaces of the gods, we tasted of such entertainment and delights as rarely fall to the lot of the heaven-dwellers; languor and fatigue, care and anxiety are things of the past with us; we are only conscious of a supreme, ineffable content. We crave leave to proceed to where Rama abides. I pray your holiness to extend to me your kindness and compassion. Whereabouts is the asrama of Rama? How far is it from here? Which is the way that takes us to it?"

It spoke highly of the devotion of Bharata and his supreme faith in the tapas and omniscience of Bharadwaja that he requested the information of the sage, while Guha and many others could as well furnish it. "Child!" replied the saint "a yojana and half from here, there is a mount by name Chitrakoota and around it a large forest uninhabited by man. The Mandakini flows north of it, its banks covered with thick woods bright with flowers. Rama's asrama lies between the river and Chitrakoota. I see it with my eye of spirit. Follow for a while the path that leads from here due south; branch off another that leads south-west from it and after a time you will come upon the hermitage of Rama".

When Bharata was ready for the march, the ladies of Dasaratha got down from their litters and surrounded Bharadvaja, the knower of Brahman. Kausalya and Sumitra laid themselves at the feet of the sage; he noticed that they were wan and emaciated with grief at being separated from Rama and shook with age and awe at finding themselves in the presence of the holy One. Then Kaikeyi, bowed down with grief at being the cause of infinite woe and misery to Rama and through him to all the world, her heart-hopes frustrated, an object of universal scorn and contempt, made a hurried salutation to the maharshi and sheltered herself behind Bharata, all ashamed to stand in the holy presence like others. Though he was aware of everything that took place, Bharadvaja wanted to teach a lesson to Kaikeyi and asked the prince to point out to him the wives of Dasaratha. Bharata grasped the purpose of the sage, who desired the world to know the nature and character of the queens through the mouth of their son; ever loyal to truth, he turned towards his host with clasped hands and said: "Holy Sir! This lady who, though lean with fasts and grief, gives one the idea of the god of Dharma come down on earth, is Kausalya, the first and foremost of the wives of my father. She is the thrice-happy mother of that Ideal Man, Rama, with the lordly gait of a maddened lion, even as Aditi gave birth to Maha Vishnu. The other lady who supports her on her right and has been the play-ground of many a sorrow, is Sumitra, the second of my father's wives; there she stands like a stately Karnikara tree, when the summer heat had drained its flowers of all life and brightness. Lakshmana and Satrughna are her sons, handsome as the two aswins, and heroes of unfailing prowess. And this woman by my side is the infamous Kaikeyi;

she drove Rama and Lakshmana to the forests of Dandaka haunted by the Rakshasas, and exposed them to danger and death; she it is that foully slew Dasaratha with the keen poignant grief at having lost his son. Liable to sudden outbursts of insensate fury, her heart and intellect have not been purified by the study of the Holy Books or by association with the virtuous. Of boundless pride and self-conceit, she sees not in the whole world any one that approaches her in beauty and loveliness. She hides the heart of a demon of wickedness under the face of an angel of perfection. Ever wedded to the lust of wealth and power, her soul knows no pity nor shrinks from the darkest crime. She is the source and fountain of all my misery. I sum up every evil and sin I perpetrated in all my past lives when I call her my mother." Blinding tears choked his speech; fire flashed from his eyes; and he sighed hot and fiercely like an infuriated elephant.

But, Bharadvaja calmed him gently and said: "Child! You do ill in laying the blame on Kaikeyi. It is but Providence that put such thoughts into her heart. I take it that Rama is exiled to the forests for the greatest good of the gods, the danavas, the rishis and holy brahmanas. So, there is no reason why you should grieve or revile Kaikeyi."

Then Bharata went round the sage, saluted him, received the affectionate blessings and ordered the army to march. Some drove in chariots bright with gold, to which fleet horses were yoked. Some rode on elephants, bull and calf, that moved majestically like huge clouds covering the sky at the end of summer, while chains, garlands and sweet-chiming bells decorated their vast bulk; others travelled in litters, palanquins and other conveyances. The infantry marched on foot.

Kausalya and the other royal ladies travelled fast, eager to catch a glimpse of the dear face of Rama. Bharata had Vasishtha's permission to ride in a palanquin resplendent as the sun and the moon. The mighty host journeyed south, crossed the woods, the mountains and the rivers that lay south of the Ganga and drew near the wood where Rama abode, disturbing and frightening the men, the beasts and the birds on their way, like a huge cloud in the sky that gathers volume as it proceeds.

CHAPTER CXIII.

THE SEARCH FOR RAMA'S ASRAMA.

THE beasts and the birds on their way fled to other forests, guided on by their respective leaders. Bears, deer, and antelopes appeared in troops on mountains, river banks and wooded hills. Like a storm-tossed ocean, or the winter clouds, Bharata's army hid the earth with its elephants, horses, chariots, foot-soldiers and conveyances. Bharata travelled far in his eagerness and stayed not until his attention was drawn to it by the fatigue and exhaustion of the animals. He turned to Vasishtha and said: "Holy Sir! It seems we are nearing the goal of our journey and are come to the place mentioned by maharshi Bharadvaja. Yonder is mount Chitrakoota; hard by flows the Mandakini; there we see the lovely forest at a distance, black as a storm-cloud. Our elephant-corps march gaily up the slopes of the mountain, like huge black rocks. The Vakula trees, shaken by the troops, rain their flowers on the earth, like winter-clouds. Deers and antelopes frisk and gambol everywhere along the

hill sides, like sharks that disport themselves on the bosom of the sea. Satrughna! this is the favorite haunt of the kinnaras. Deer flee before our troops like pale autumn clouds before a strong gale. Behold our men dressing their hair in fanciful styles like cloud-banks and decorating it with clusters of fragrant flowers, after the fashion of the southerners. This forest, till now frightfully lonely and silent, bids fair to rival Ayodhya in splendor and pomp. The dust raised by the beasts hides the sky; but the wind clears it away at once, saying to itself, as it were, in pity and sympathy: 'This Bharata has taken incalculable pains to find out the asrama of Rama and has travelled far to see it. It is but just that I render him every assistance in my power'. Our charioteers drive their vehicles, fast and furious, through this trackless forest, their fleet coursers seconding their efforts with a will. Frightened thereat, the peacocks spread their gay plumage and seek the shelter of mountain caves. This holy spot, fit for devout ascetics to reside in, is charming to the eye and the heart, even as the heaven of the gods. Behold yon antelopes, male and female, coursing through the woods, gaily decked with flowers. Let our troops search these forests far and wide until they come upon the Great Ones, Rama and Lakshmana." Countless warriors set forth in armd bands in all directions; one of them found a spot from which rose the blue smoke of human habitation. They came to Bharata and said, "Smoke betokens the presence of man; perhaps Rama and Lakshmana reside here or some other recluses, who may direct us aright." Bharata turned joyfully to his attendants and cried "Let the troops stay here, until I order them to proceed. Maharshi Vasishtha, and Sumantra go in advance and

I follow them." He walked on towards the spot whence the smoke issued, while the troops turned their looks on it and rejoiced to think that their prince was very soon to come upon Rama, whose sweet and noble presence would chase away all their sorrows.

CHAPTER XCIV.

MOUNT CHITRAKOOTA.

MEANWHILE Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta had a happy month of it on the mount Chitrakoota. One day Rama pointed out to the wife of his heart the beauties and peculiarities of the hill, that she might rejoice thereat; and he was amply rewarded by rejoicing in her joy. They had abode there for many days; yet it caused them as much suprise and delight as though it was their first visit to the place. Rama, the god of the Shining Ones, had nothing to fear wherever he might be. He roamed with Seeta among the hills and dales and expatiated upon the joys and pleasures of a life in the virgin forests. "Seeta! I do not, for a moment, regret, ever since I came here, that I left a crown behind me or that I am denied the company of my kin and friends. Darling! Observe the beauty of this Chitrakoota. Clouds of birds hide it from view, while its lofty peaks pierce the sky. Untold wealth lies in the numerous veins of gold, silver and other metals that run through it. Here it shows a silvery sheen, there a blood-red hue. Here you come upon patches colored like emerald, sapphire, topaz, crystal or mercury; there upon a mosaic ot white and black. Tigers, leopards, bears and other fierce beasts of prey, various species of deer and birds put away from themselves their

cruel nature and habits and dwell in peace and harmony, thanks to the presence of the holy sages. The mango, jambu, asana, lodhra, priyala, panasa, dhava, ankola, bhavya, tinisa, bilva, tinduka, bamboo, kasmeeri, arishta, varuna, madhuka, tilaka, jujube, amalaka, neepa, cane, dhanvana, jeevaka and other varieties of forest trees cover the hill slopes, their deep shades heavy with the fragrance of the fruits and flowers that crown them. A stream of joy courses through my veins to see the kinnaras, male and female, enjoy themselves on the slopes of the hill. In yonder playgrounds of the vidyadharas there hang from the trees men's weapons and women's apparel. This mount, whose sides are washed by springs and torrents, resembles a huge elephant in rut. Whose heart rejoices not at the breeze blowing from the vast caves laden with the perfume of a thousand flowers? I may dwell here for years out of count with you and Lakshmana and know neither care nor sorrow. This mount improves upon acquaintance, hidden as it is beneath flowers, fruits, beasts, birds, trees and creepers. This forest life helps me in two ways. My heart isfilled with strange delight; I am glad to have fulfilled my sire's behests; and Bharata is rendered the happier for it. Seeta! Are you content to live with me on this mount, keeping strict control over your thoughts, words and acts? Does your innocent soul take delight in the gentle zephyr, the koil's notes, the hum of bees and the blowing of fragrant flowers? The hermit life we strive to lead gives us happy days and nights in this life; and I have it from the royal sages of the line of Ikshwaku that it is a sure pathway to heaven-life and Liberation as well. This hill is dotted with large slabs of all shades of color, black, white and yellow. Plants and herbs of mystic virtue grow here and proclaim their

presence far and wide at nights by the flaming radiance that streams from them. Here you come upon large caves that are curiously fashioned like mansions; there you enter spacious gardens dense with trees and creepers; and anon you tread hard bare rock for a long way. This mount seems to break through the earth and shoot right up to the sky. You can see it miles away all round. Completely hidden beneath the thick foliage of kushtha, punnaga, sthagara and bhoorjapatra trees, it is provided with soft, lxurious couches of lotus leaves. The happy couples that enjoyed themselves hereabout have left behind them traces of scattered wreaths and fruits. The lordly capital of Indra nor the heavenly lake Manasa comes within a day's march of this in point of charm and beauty. If it were given me to abide in this wood, like the royal saints my forefathers, keeping high vows and observances, with yourself and Lakshmana to keep me company, I would feel as happy and content as if I ruled this broad earth from my royal throne at Ayodhya ".

CHAPTER XCV.

THE MANDAKINI.

THEY descended the hill and Rama pointed out to Seeta the holy stream Mandakini flowing with sweet pellucid water. Her face glowed like a blown lotus with the joy of beholdng lofty mountains, forests, trees, beasts birds and other strange objects of woodland life. " My love," said he "see you yon Mandakini? How curiously fashioned those sandy hillocks are! Swans and other aquatic birds dart here and there among the lotuses in mad joy. They

are a charming sight to see, even as your sweet self in all the beauty of your slender waist, swelling hips, tapering thighs, lovely hands and feet adorned with melodious ornaments, and fair face radiant with pleasure. Numerous trees line the banks heavy with flowers and fruits and put to shame the pools in which Kubera disports himself with his women. This water invites me to bathe in it; troops of wild beasts drink at this spot and the turbid stream wears a garment of lovely red in consequence. Behold yon ascetics that come to bathe at stated times in the sacred river, in all the majesty of matted hair and deerskin robes. There stand others who pray to the Lord of light with lifted hands and stern observances. The trees that crown the lofty peaks are tossed by strong gales and strew the waters far and wide with flowers and leaves, like skilful dancers who toss their arms to and fro and scatter flowers around them. Here the water is clear as crystal; there small mounts of sand lift their heads above the surface; anon the siddhas play in the cool waves in high glee. Does it not remind you of a doting husband clasping in passionate embrace the love of his heart, her fine dress of shimmering white more revealing than veiling the beauty of her tapering thighs, faultless in their symmetry. Clusters of flowers are driven ashore by the strong breeze in some places; in others other the bunches are gaily borne along the current. It looks as if the lover had torn half a piece from the garment of his lady love. Look at the chakravakas that sit thereon and melodiously invite their mates to play with them.

"Guileless heart! Is it not more delightful to make our home on Chitrakoota than in the crowded town of Ayodhya? A town life is nowhere by the side of this retired quiet abode where we can enjoy ourselves

undisturbed by others. Yon Mandakini is a dearer sight to me than your sweet self. Here come to bathe every day pure-souled siddhas who engage themselves in severe tapas, with restrained senses and thoughts. This is an extremely sanctified spot, thanks to their presence here. Come, let us bathe and swim in the cool waters of the Mandakini; everything is ready towards it. Put away fear and timidity from you and enjoy yourself with me as you would in the company of your playmates. The wavelets caused by the motion of your breast and thighs will submerge the the thick carpet of red and white lotuses that cover the waters. Transfer your affections and solicitious care from the people of Ayodhya to the poor beasts that dwell hereabouts. Take it that Chitrakoota is your Ayodhya and the Mandakini your Sarayu.

"The righteous Lakshmana respects my least wishes; you are a wife after my heart; man wants but little here below except a faithful brother and a loving wife. Bathing in the holy waters in the morning, midday, and evening, honey, fruits and roots my only food, your sweet self my companion in my roamings through the woods, I clean forget Ayodhya and the concerns of the state. The beasts of the forest wander in herds along the banks of the Mandakini; elephants, lions and monkeys put away from them their inborn hate and ferocity and drink at the same ford, thanks to the yogic might of the maharshis; who would not forget all care and anxiety and rejoice as he wanders through the woods that line its banks, bending low under their tribute of flowers and fruits?" Thus did Rama describe to her the beauties of the Mandakini and roam with Seeta in the dark forests that cover the sides of Chitrakoota.

CHAPTER XCVI.

LAKSHMANA'S ANGER.

HAVING taken Seeta through the loveliest prospects around the Mandakini, Rama sat himslf down on the hill-slope and said "Seeta! There is pure meat for you and wholesome. This is sweet, this has been cooked to a nice turn." He tasted them first and passed them on to his love.

And while they were dining, the army of Bharata drew near. The dust raised by them rose into the sky along with the deafening din; the beasts of the forests trembled in affright and fled away in troops in all directions. Rama heard it too and saw the animals scamper off in wild fear. He turned to the valiant Lakshmana who stood by and said, "Listen to the grand volume of sound borne on us, like the roar of dark clouds; frightful, is it not? Elephants and buffaloes that make the dark depths of the forests their home, are chased by the lions and scatter themselves in all directions. Is it a stampede caused by the fierce beasts of prey or by a king or one as powerful, who has come here a-hunting? Even the very birds have deserted this hill. Go, bring me full news of this strange happening."

And Lakshmana climbed a lofty sala tree, flower-laden and looked around him. A vast army was approaching the wood from the north. At once out to Rama, "Brother! put out the fires; track us by the smoke. Lead Seeta into the cave and arm yourself quick."

"Boy!" asked Rama "Can you guess whom they follow?" Baleful fires darted from the eyes of Lakshmana and threatened to consume the advancing troops as he

exclaimed: "It is Bharata, the son of the infamous Kaikeyi. She has her wish, now that he is placed on the throne. But, he is never free from danger so long as we are alive, the lawful claimants. I believe he comes our wild retreat to slay us and rule over Kosala free from care and anxiety. Behold the spreading kovidara flag that waves over his chariot. Countless bands proceed here gaily, on fleet horses and huge elephants; shall we fight them from the top of the mountain, or await their arrival here in arms? That kovidara flag shall be ours in to-day's battle. At last, I have set my eyes on that wicked wretch Bharata who has worked all this woe to you, to Seeta, to myself and to the whole world. Yonder comes our mortal enemy for whom you have been driven from the kingdom that is yours by every right. He shall not escape death to-day at my hands. We owe him a heavy debt of vengeance and it is but just we should discharge it in full. It is no sin to kill him, no cruelty. Nay, the whole world will come under your happy sway if you slay this miserable sinner, that has so wantonly outraged Dharma. Was it not Kaikeyi that wrought all this wickedness, only to secure the crown to her precious son? Well, I shall wring her heart and slay her son before her very eyes, even as a maddened elephant breaks down a stately forest tree. Nay, there is yet more to come; I shall wipe them off the face of the earth, Kaikeyi, her kin, Manthara and other dependants of hers. I shall rid the world of this incarnate sin. I had much ado to smother down my anger and distrust. I shall let loose the fire of my pent-up wrath on the armies of Bharata in the shape of mighty shafts, even as a forest conflagration consumes vast stretches of dry withered grass. My arrows shall pierce the hearts of the foes and these forest glades shall run

with roaring torrents of blood. The wild beasts hereabouts shall feast their fill on the mutilated bodies of elephants, horses and men. I pray you not to disappoint my vengeance and lower me in my eyes. Ample testimony you had, till now, of my valour and prowess. Have you ever known me to return from a battle except as a victor ? Was I ever a debtor to my bow and arrows ? Did I fail to gratify them with holocausts of my enemies ? And shall I act otherwise on this most momentous day ? Say but the word ; Bharata and his countless hosts are things of the past".

CHAPTER XCVII

RAMA CALMS LAKSHMANA.

HE was beside himself with fury and all eager to begin the fray ; Rama saw it was high time to check his vengeful spirit and said : " Supremely wise and intelligent is Bharata and a hero of heroes. When he has come to fight us in his own person, discarding any substitutes, what purpose shall our weapons serve us ? Do I crave for the world's censure which waits to proclaim ' Dasaratha, out of his boundless affection, bestowed the crown on Bharata. Rama slew him out of spite and disappointment and usurped the throne.' Have I not given my plighted word to fulfil my sire's promise to Kaikeyi and keep his name and fame unsoiled by an untruth ? If I kill Bharata in battle, what shall I do with the kingdom ? Fie upon the wealth and power bought with the blood of my kinsmen and friends ! Would any cast a look upon poisoned sweetmeats ? I seek pleasure, wealth and righteousness, nay, the soverignty of this earth but for my brothers.

It is the veriest truth. If I ever harbour any desire for the crown of Kosala, it is more that you should enjoy the sweets of royal power and boundless luxury. I swear it upon my weapons. It is a trifle for me to make myself the master of this world; but the throne of Indra is abhorrent to me if I have to ascend it upon the steps of unrighteousness. If my heart ever prove traitor to my brothers and seek any joy or pleasure for itself, may heaven's curse blast it into nothing.

"Let be. Why should we misunderstand Bharata's motive in coming here? He came back from his uncle's place to Ayodhya and was duly informed of what happened in his absence. Sumitra might have told him that we abide in this forest. Boundless is his love and affection to me; and I hold him as something dearer than my life. He knows very well that in our house the eldest son inherits the throne. His heart would bleed to hear that I undergo any hardship or privation in the wild woods. So, it is plain to me that he comes here to take me back to Ayodhya and with no hostile intent. He has let loose his fiery wrath upon poor Kaikeyi and has pierced her heart with his cruel words. He has somehow persuaded our sire to place me upon the throne and has come here to pray my acceptance of it.

"It is but meet that Bharata should come to see us now. Never, in his wildest dreams, has the shadow of any evil to us crossed his heart. Why do you suspect Bharata? Had you any harm or injury at his hands till now? Or did he at any time give expression to words that have aroused such misgivings in you? Speak not of Bharata thus cruelly and scornfully. You revile *me* when you revile *him*. Some time ago you were all afire to slay our sire; now Bharata's turn is come; and much evil will ensue if I let things run thus. Master

this cruel revengeful spirit anyhow. Would any one contemplate the death of his father, though the direst dangers and difficulties tempt his soul to it? Would any one point his sword at the heart of him who came into the world along with him, who is flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone?

"Is your heart set upon the crown that you speak so? Wait till Bharata comes here; I shall get it from him. If I but say in jest, 'Bharata! Lakshmana would wear the crown; give it to him,' he will take me at my word and never bestow a thought upon the throne ever after." Thus in many a wise did Rama seek to calm his raging spirit.

The gentle and loving accents of Rama made Lakshmana shrink within himself with shame. Yet it was not self-interest that made him speak so; rather Rama's welfare and the earnest desire to ward off harm and sorrow from him. He feared and suspected Bharata, though he had no reason to do so. When our word goes for nothing, we try to change the topic; so Lakshmana, now thoroughly ashamed of himself, said to Rama, "It may as well be our father come to take us back to Ayodhya". Quick to observe and to adapt himself to the changing circumstances, Rama allowed him time to wear away his shamfacedness and seemed to accept his suggestion. "Yes. It is extremely probable that His Majesty has deigned to pay us a visit in our lowly abode. Or he may come to take us back to the capital, thinking upon the dangers and difficulties that might befall us in the woods and saying to himself quite naturally 'My children have been brought up in luxury and comfort and are not made to rough it in the wild woods'. Or he may have repented of having allowed Seeta to accompany us here and have come down to had her back; for she has no call to expose herself to the discomforts

and perils of long years in the Dandaka, an utter stranger from her very birth to anything but affluence and happiness. Yonder come the two coursers, fleet as wind, that are always yoked to His Majesty's chariot. There I see the state elephant, Satrunjaya, marching in advance of the army, like a mountain in motion, tossing about his limbs in mad rut. But one thing causes me sore misgiving; I perceive not the snow-white umbrella that is held aloft over our universally respected sire. Come down from your lofty perch; and behave towards Bharata as I advised you". And Lakshmana stood at his side the next moment, his palms clasped in humble reverence.

Meanwhile Bharata ordered his troops to halt at the distance of half a yojana on either side of Chitrakoota, that they might not cause any annoyance or disturbance to the asrama of his brother. Obedient to the orders of that wise and prudence prince, the army put away pride and unruliness from their hearts and stayed near Chitrakoota, anxious to win the esteem and approbation of Raghava.

CHAPTER XCVIII.

THE SEARCH FOR THE ASRAMA.

HAVING assigned suitable quarters for the troops Bharata proceeded on foot, all athirst to catch a glimpse of Rama. He turned to Satrughna and said, 'Take these hunters and our retinue and carefully search every inch of this forest. Let Guha and his kin arm themselves and rest not until they come upon the asrama of Rama. I shall engage myself in the same task, assisted by my ministers, priests,

Brahmanas and citizens. My soul knows no peace until I behold Rama, his heroic brother Lakhmana and the thrice-fortunate Seeta. My heart knows no joy until I bless my eyes with a sight of my brother's face, lovely as the moon in her full orb and of his eyes large and lustrous as lotus-leaves. Grief will be my companion until I lay my head at my brother's feet adorned with the dhwaja (flag), the vajra (the favorite weapon of Indra) the lotus, the elephant-goad, the vase holding the Amrita and other signs of royalty. Sorrow will dog my steps until my brother is seated on a splendid throne worthy of his rank and worth, the diadem of the emperor son his brows and crown me with his holy feet that become me most. My heart will bleed until I see my brother bathed with holy waters on the glorious throne that has come down to us through countless eons of time. How blessed is Lakshmana to be able to behold the face of my Rama, resplendent as the full-orbed moon and lighted up with star-like eyes! How fortunate is Seeta to be privileged to follow Rama the lord of the worlds! Holy, thrice holy, is mount Chitrakoota to offer a dwelling to prince Rama when he is wandering through the pathless forests, an exile and stranger! Mount Himalaya is no where beside it. These wild woods that know no man, but form the home and haunt of fierce beasts, have laid up untold merit in past ages; else what chance for Rama to dwell here and he the Light of lights and the lord of wealth?" And Bharata, all unused to trudge afoot, threaded the mazes of the lofty forest trees, lending an additional charm to the hill slopes by their graceful burden of fruits and flowers.

He revolved in his mind what he should say to Rama and what telling arguments he should adduce. He reached the foot of a stately sala tree that crowned

the summit of Chitrakoota with its lovely flowers and foliage and espied a column of smoke rising from the asrama of Rama. The people thereabouts informed him and his followers that Rama dwelt hard by. He fainted with joy like storm-tossed mariners at the sight of land. Then the troops halted there, while Bharata and Guha proceeded towards the asrama of Rama, their attendants following them at a distance.

CHAPTER XCIX.

BHARATA MEETS RAMA.

HAVING assigned suitable quarters to the troops, Bharata, impelled by his desire to see Rama, said to Vasishtha, "Holy sir! pray direct the queens to follow us". He walked on very fast and called the attention of Satrughna to the numerous signs that betokened the approach of the asrama of Rama. Sumantra came after them, no less eager so have a sight of his dear prince. They had not gone far when they caught a glimpse of the abode of Rama surrounded by the cottages of the hermits. There were two rooms, one for the sacred Fires and the other to receive visitors. Piles of split wood lay around for lighting fires at night. Flowers were gathered and kept ready for the worship of the gods. Along the paths that led to the river fords, the trees bore strange devices of bark and kusa grass to intimate the presence of the princes to each other. Dried dung of deer and ox lay in heaps to build warming fires in winter.

Bharata's face wore a bright look when he beheld them; his heart danced with joy. He said to Satrughna and the ministers, "I believe we are almost at the

locality indicated by maharshi Bharadvaja. The Mandakini must be somewhere here. Lakshmana has tied strips of bark high up the trees to guide him when he goes abroad at nights for fruits, roots or water. Our course lies this way and this is also used by the maddened elephants when they tear about, wildly trumpeting, along the base of the mount. Behold the thick smoke that rises from the Garhapatya fire tended so carefully by the hermits morning and evening. It is no culinary fire; for there should be no smoke, but only flames. It is no sacrificial fire; for we should see cinders, but no dense smoke. I am about to stand in the presence of the Supreme Person, Rama, who led my steps into the adytum of Wisdom; from him I received my sacraments. Like unto a maharashi, he is crowned with every excellence of head and heart". They were at the foot of the mount by that time and on the banks of the Mandakini Bharata said to those about him," The supremely effulgent Lord of the worlds has renounced the joys and comforts of life and roams the dreary forests, all through me. That Ideal King is seated on the bare earth in this uninhabited spot. Well do I deserve the scorn and contempt of the world. It makes no difference whether I am living or dead. So I shall clasp the feet of Rama and persuade him anyhow to return to Ayodhya. If Lakshmana charges me with the perfidy of Kaikeyi and says 'Brother! You but waste your compassion on him', I shall even throw myself at his feet though he be younger in years; for, mighty is the issue that depends on it. If I fail to win him over to gentleness and sympathy, I shall lay my head at the feet of Seeta, the Mother of Mercy, and entreat her to intercede for me with her lord". Thus raving on incoherently, he drew near the lovely cottage of Rama.

It was very spacious and was thatched with the leaves of sala, tala and other trees. Soft kusa grass was spread on the floor as on an altar in the sacrificial hall. The place was bright with the sheen of bows inlaid with gold, the mighty messengers of sure death to those against whom they are bent and capable of working impossibilities, even like the vajra of Indra; terrible arrows peeped from the quivers with blazing mouths like the rays of the morning sun or the great serpents that range Bhogavati, the capital of the Nagas; swords exquisite of temper and curiously wrought, gleamed from scabbards of fine gold, like lambent lightnings darting through golden clouds; broad shields hung aloft, wondrously chased with gold; and there were finger-guards of iguana-skin decorated with gold. Foes dared not raise their eyes to the lowly cottage, as deer shun the lair of a lordly lion. To the north-east of it there was a low platform with an altar upon it where glowed the sacred Fires. On closer observation, they beheld a Great One seated within the hut; he was clad in the garb of hermits, in deer skin and dress of bark and wore his hair in matted coils: like a flaming fire looked he, crowned with the a halo of blinding glory and Bharata made him out by it to be his brother Sree Ramachandra. With long and mighty arms reaching below his knees, with powerful chest and shoulders like those of a lion, with large and lustrous eyes resembling the petals of a lotus, Raghava the lord of the world, was seated on the bare earth spread with kusa grass, Seeta and Lakshmana a little in the rear, like the eternal Brahma. Overcome with grief and sorrow, Bharata rushed towards him. All unmanned, the blinding tears almost choked him as he cried, "Alas! that I should live to see the wild beasts of the forest paying court

to my brother, whose feet the citizens of Ayodhya contended to have the hour of touching in the hall of audience. Woe is me, when the lord of wealth, clad in priceless garments, covers his limbs with deerskin at the call of Dharma! Ah me, that the lovely locks, ever crowned with bright and fragrant flowers, should be coiled in dust and dirt! Instead of laying up merit by yagas and yagnas as the Books enjoin, he is driven to mortify himself and observe fasts and penances at a period of life least fitted for it. What terrible sin have I committed that my eyes should behold dirt and dust cake his limbs, which erstwhile were smeared with rare and priceless sandal paste? Ramachandra, formed to enjoy every luxury and comfort, has been forced to undergo all this trouble and misery. Fie upon this wretched life of mine that the meanest in the world regards as below contempt! Far better that I were dead and forgot."

So sobbing and wailing out of a broken heart, he rushed forward to grasp the feet of Rama; but blinded by his tears, he groped wildly and fell down in a faint. He was just able to cry out "Brother!" and no more. Satrughna, more master of himself, clasped the feet of Rama, voicing forth the grief that tore at his heart. Ramachandra raised them up, clasped them to his heart and, for all his iron fortitude, was unable to keep back the burning tears. The meeting of Rama and Lakshmana with Sumantra and Guha resembled the conjunction of the Sun and the Moon with Venus and Jupiter. The sight of the noble princes, like unto lordly elephants, meeting one another in that lonely forest and sorrowing piteously was too much even for the rough dwellers thereof, who could not restrain their tears.

CHAPTER C.

KINGCRAFT.

THE moment he saw Bharata, Rama inferred that his brother had assumed the functions of royalty; and he instructed him in the science of government, under the guise of making kindly enquires. For, he would have no chance to teach him his duty when he should come to know that Dasaratha was dead and that Bharata had renounced the throne, electing to live the life of a recluse.

He said to himself, in wonder "Our father used to exclaim at the sight of fragrant wreaths and flowers 'These would look well on the hair of my darling Bharata'; and *that* Bharata comes to me now with matted locks! If fine robes or garments were brought to him, he would at once exclaim 'It would look well if Bharata wore these'; and *that* Bharata is now clad in deerskin and strips of bark! It is almost impossible for my father to make Bharata accept any present from him; and *that* Bharata is now obliged to entreat from others, with clasped hands, what he wants for himself! No bed of flowers was soft enough for Bharata, but my sire would always seat his darling on his lap; and *that* Bharata rolls on the ground before me!" No one there could contain his grief to see Bharata in his miserable plight lie in the dust, shorn of his dazzling lustre, like the glorious Lord of light at the end of the Day of Brahma. Worn out to a shadow, pale and haggard, his very mother could not make him out. Rama raised him up, embraced him warmly, smelt the crown of his head and kept back his rebellious grief to console him who came into the world along with him. "Darling!" said he "how is it I see

you here in this dreary forest ? Does it not lie upon *you* to wait upon our sire and render him every service ? Where has he gone ? He could never miss you for a moment. There is no chance of your coming to these woods if he is alive. Your long journey from the Kekaya country fills me with surprise. How is it I see you emaciated, pale, a ghost of your bright self ? What brought you here to these frightful wastes ? His Majesty, is he among the living ? If so, you have his permission to come to me here. He cannot live away from you ; then, has he fallen a prey to overwhelming grief ? Have powerful foes taken base advantage of your misfortune and youth and wrested the crown from your hands ? Or have your subjects taken to heart my exile at the orders of Kaikeyi and driven away their unpopular ruler ? This kingdom has belonged to us from the very beginnings of time. Or have you wearied of service at the feet at our father of unparalleled valor and come here to seek ease and independence ?

Is it all well with the emperor Dasaratha, high-born, truthful, righteous and crowned with hundreds of Aswamedhas and Rajasooyas ? Are you here the bearer of the tidings of some serious illness of his, brought on by the sight of the untold evil wrought through the promise made to Kaikeyi ? Kausalya, my mother, whom endless grief has marked for its own, fares she well ? I hope Sumitra has nothing to vex her, who gave to the world those nobles heroes, Lakshmana and Satrughna ? And Kaikeyi, your mother, who deserves my devotion and love more than they, does her heart rejoice, now that her hopes have been amply realised ?

Does maharshi Vasishtha, the guru of our race, continue to receive at your hands the worship and reverence offered to him by the kings of the line of

Ikshwaku? A knower of Brahman is he, and master of all sciences and arts; his wisdom is equalled by his holiness and the spiritual lustre engendered of it. Do you render due respect and veneration to your chaplain, who assists Vasishtha? An utter stranger to pride and envy, nobly born, a well of wisdom, he is known to be totally selfless; he is a proficient in the mysteries of yagas and yagnas, from the Agnihotra to the Aswamedha; he tends the holy Fires ever watchfully; of mighty intellect, he practises the dharma of this world and the next with equal zeal and sincerity. Does he keep you in mind, at stated times, of the offerings to the Fires, past and future? Do you gratify the gods by sacrifices, your parents by cheerful obedience and affectionate service, your gurus by reverence meet and faithful devotion, your kinsmen by loading them with favors, your elders in age, wisdom and holiness by humble salutation and the Brahmanas and *literati* by liberal gifts? Do you honor as he deserves, Sudhanva, our master in the science of war and government? Are your councillors intelligent, nobly born, versed in statecraft, adepts at reading the hearts of others and faithful even as yourself? Counsels of state, matured by the deliberations of expert politicians and religiously guarded, conduce to the success of the king's projects.

Do you carefully regulate your hours of work and sleep? Are your waking thoughts in the mornings devoted to the improvement of the resources of your kingdom? Taking counsel of none and taking counsel of all are equally to be avoided. Our own judgments are far from impartial in the matter of carefully weighting the pros and cons of affairs; bias and prejudice are more likely to warp our hearts. Unity of judgment and secrecy are hopeless in a council of many. I hope your

projects do not leak out ere they are accomplished. Slow to decide but quick to act, do the forces that you employ bring in a golden harvest, thousand-fold? Time takes to itself the results of dilatory actions. Your plans and schemes should announce themselves to your subject-kings only when they have borne fruit but never at the early or the middle stages. Do you guard your state secrets so carefully that others despair of getting at them through guess or inference or observation?

Do you pass over thousands of numbskulls to select one man of intellect and talents, who goes about his work calmly, carefully and thoroughly? Such a one is invaluable in national crises and deadlocks; for you can rely upon him to bring you out of the difficulty with enhanced fame and prestige. Thousands and crores of thick-witted pig-headed counsellors are but a broken reed for the king to lean upon when a kingdom's existence hangs on their wise and prompt action. A good and able minister will secure bonndless glory to his king and the subject princes; he should be firm and unshaken of purpose, careful and deliberate in his actions, expert in the mysteries of kingcraft and aware of the projects and plans of his enemies as soon as they are formed.

I hope your superior servants are employed in preparing and serving your meals and such like responsible occupations; the middle class should be used to look after the sleeping accomodation, seats and conveyances; and the lower ranks should be engaged in cleaning the feet, pressing them and taking charge of your slippers. These distinctions should be carefully observed; else you will sow a plentiful crop of jealousy and spite.

Kings use to test the loyalty and attachment of their ministers and counsellors by sending them, through

secret channels, fine robes, ornaments, conveyances and other valuable articles, purporting to be presents from the royal ladies or from other monarchs, and carefully watching them the while. I hope your ministers have passed through such tests successfully; of course they have served your house for generations; they are pure and unsullied in thought, wood and deed and are em ployed only in very important affairs,

Son of Kaikeyi! I hope you do not cruelly punish your subjects and drive them to carry their complaints to your ministers who restrain you in consequence. Sacrificial priests scorn a man who desires to engage their services in a rite to be financed by the proceeds of his iniquitous profession (he has made his wealth by accepting gifts that are condemned by the Books); good women loathe him who would force their love; even so your people will shun and execrate you if you punish the innocent and fill your coffers with wealth extorted from them by cruel torture.

There is a class of men—arch-fiend to be nearer truth—who are adepts in the use of the Four Means (conciliation, bribery, dissension and force); they are experts in the theory and practice of self-aggrandisement and exploitation of others, taught by Ranaka Chanakya and other luminaries of that school. They lie in wait for chances to blacken the characters of the trusted servants of the king and tamper with their fidelity. Fear is a thing unknown to them in their nefarious task of wringing the heart of the monarch; and they are ever intent on making themselves masters of his wealth and power in course of time. If you come upon any of the species, kill him at once and surely; else he is sure to take *your* life or your kingdom. I hope you have not harboured any such demon unawares.

I trust you have not dismissed our commander-in-chief and appointed another in his place. He is ever supremely content and magnifies the kindness and consideration of his master. He is the terror of his foes; his subtle mind is ever occupied with arraying his phalanxes to suit the enemy's tactics, breaking through their serried ranks and leading his men to glorious victory. No danger takes him unawares. The soul of loyalty and devotion, pure of heart and deed, of high lineage, his capacity for work is something marvellous. Do you carefully inquire into the antecedents and test the courage of your chief warriors and attach them to yourself by honors and presents? I hope they are remarkable for their strength, veterans in every branch of warfare, of exceptional valor and prowess, and endowed with noble virtues. Do you pay your troops regularly and provide them with rations, suited to their work? Else, the paid servants turn against their master and prove faithless, which leads to great evils. Is every member of the warrior caste devoted to you, heart and soul, and ready to lay down their lives for you? Your ambassadors, plenipotentiaries, representatives and consuls are, I hope, your countrymen, trained to read the hearts of others and deal with every contingency successfully; quick and apt in reply, they should be able to deliver your message and the answer to the letter; they should ever keep their master's directions in mind and secure his interests though speaking on many a topic to throw the other party off the scent; they should be endowed with extraordinary powers of discrimination and analysis.

Eighteen persons there are whom a king should put to the severest tests possible—the prime-minister, the high-priest, the heir-apparent, the commander-in chief, the captain of the wardens of the gate, the superintendent

of the harem; the inspector-general of prisons, the president of the board of revenue, the proclaimer of the king's commands to the people, the judges, the advocate-general and his staff, the paymaster of forces, the captain of the might watch whose duty it is to go about the town in disguise and guard the gates, the walls and the fortifications; the paymaster of the hired servants; the master of ceremonies and major domo; the head of those who decorate the andience-hall every day, arrange the seats in the order of precedence, receive and lead to their places the members of the audience, keep out those as have not the right of entry, preserve order and silence and watch over the safety of the hall; the head of those who execute the king's decrees of punishment on criminals; the general-in-chief of the troops that garrison the fortresses; and the commander of the frontier forts and troops. Of these, the first three are ever near the king, and need not be put to the test as he can observe them for himself. The others on his side and the whole eighteen on the enemy's side should every one of them, be under the constant observation of three spies cleverly disguised, unknown to one another, to see whether they discharge their duties aright.

I hope, you do not neglect, as weak and powerless, the foes that have been exiled from your dominions and have returned after the period. Surely, they would not have come back without having secured some strong support. Keep careful watch over them.

Do you carefully avoid the company of the Bauddhas, the Charvakas and other atheistical brahmanas; they are proficient in instilling heretical principles into the minds of the unwary; ever the enemies of true wisdom, their self-conceit is equalled only by their ignorance; their intellects ever run contrary to the tenor

of the Holy Scriptures. They would not set aside the *tamasa* smritis and puranas and interpert according to the traditional canons of our great men, those composed by the maharshis and recognised as authoritative by the good; they bring bare dry logic to prove that these are useless to secure our ends here and hereafter.

Ayodhya, our captial, is the home of renowned warriors; our house holds sway over it from the very dawn of time. The people there, of all castes and orders, perform their duties conscientiously and to their level best; of restrained senses and boundless energy, they are endowed with noble excellences. Further, that city is the favourite resort of the highest exponents of every science and art; the citizens lead lives of happy content; gifted with every natural and artificial advantages, its fortifications are the despair of the enemy. Adorned with noble fanes, palaces and mansions of the nobles, teeming with splendid elephants, horses, camels and other animals, it well deserves the name *Unassailable.* Do you bestow every care in guarding our fair capital? Our dominions are thickly dotted with sacrificial grounds, the scene of many an aswamedha, chayana and other holy rites. The people are devotedly attached to their country and would not exchange it for any other on earth; they have over them a ruler after their own heart and a land almost perfect in every way. Beautiful temples, and good roads lined with pools, tanks, public water-booths and reservoirs used for purposes of irrigation abound everywhere. Very little of the land lies uncultivated; countless herds of cattle roam the pastures; it is free from such pests as drought, excessive rainfall, rats, locusts, birds and proximity to the abodes of kings. The soil is not dry and arid, depending

solely upon timely rains; but the country is covered with a network of rivers, canals and other appliances of irrigation. Green fields, gardens and groves delight the eye at every turn. Robbers, highwaymen, brigands and thieves are conspicuous by their absence, equally with the wild beasts of the forests. Honey-combed with mines of gold, silver and diamonds, it is no place for sinners; the men and women in it spend long years of happiness and comfort. In the woods that line the banks of the rivers and lakes, fairs are held on fixed days where merchants gather and a brisk trade is carried on. I hope every part of our vast kingdom enjoys peace and plenty.

Are the farmers and herdsmen in your empire growing in wealth and comfort; and do they lift their hearts to you in love and homage? Do trade and commerce flourish in your dominions? Are your exports and imports, sale and barter, steadily increasing? A king should govern all classes and grades justly and wisely; do you see to it that they enjoy every comfort and convenience and are sedulously guarded from sorrow or danger?

Do you treat your women with kindness and sympathy? Do you take watchful care that they do not hold private interviews or talks with other men? You will do well not to place too much confidence in them; for, they are by nature fickle and weak-willed and cannot keep secrets. So, keep your counsels to yourself.

Do you keep your forests, where elephants are raised, carefully concealed from others? Else they fall into the hands of your enemies. The breed of she-elephants that are used in catching the males—is it visibly increasing? I hope you are steadily adding to your studs of horses, and elephants, male and female.

Do you give audience to your subjects every morning, dressed in your royal robes? Else, they begin to suspect that you are ill, or, that something untoward has befallen you.

Do not make yourself too easily accessible to your servants; for they grow tall with pride and slight you. Nor, deny yourself to them absolutely; for, they have no chance to speak their hearts to you; they turn away from your presence; and it seriously interferes with the affairs of state. So, always adopt the golden mean.

Are your forts amply provided with money, corn, weapons, archers, engineers, a never failing supply of water and other warlike gear?

Does your expenditure fall much below your income? I trust you do not scatter your wealth among such unworthy objects as pimps, panders, singers and dancers. Brahmanas, gods, warriors, friends and the poor are fitter recipients thereof.

I believe there is no one in your kingdom of exemplary purity and truthfulness, upon whom is sprung a sudden charge of theft or peculation and who is put to death for his wealth, without due and careful inquiry being made by experts in law and sastra. I am sure that no thief or robber is caught red-handed and, after fair trial, escapes punishment in consequence of an arrangement he makes with the officers of justice that he will give over to them the stolen articles. Are your judges conscientious and brave enough to decide on the side of right in a suit between a rich man and a poor one, without being swayed by considerations of self-interest? If a ruler puts his self before every other thing and is blind to the good and the evil, the justice and the injustice, the rights and wrongs

among his subjects, the tears of the innocent, who are punished through careless inquiry, work ruin and destruction to himself, his wives and children.

Do you attach to yourself the elders, the youths and renowned medical experts by gifts, friendship and sweet talk? Do you salute brahmanas, guests, gods, ascetics, elders, teachers, holy men whose hearts are turned away from the joys of this world and the stately trees in the crossings that form the abode of higher Beings?

Do you take care to pursue the three Aims of life, each in their proper time—dharma in the forenoon, wealth in the afternoon and pleasure in the night?

The brahmanas versed in every science and art, the citizens and provincials—do they ever raise their voices in prayer to the Almighty that you reign over them long and happily? Denial of the existence of a future state and untruth; flying into a rage at our parents, teachers, brahmanas and weaklings when they happen to make a mistake or offend us; carelessness and idleness; omitting to pay our respects to the holy men that are the source and fount of all greatness; half-hearted discharge of our duties, giving a free-hand to our senses, taking no counsel with the ministers on the affairs of state and seeking the advice of those who are ever prone to put false and wrong interpretations on things; careless omission to perform such auspicious acts as to begin the day by beholding mirrors, pearls, black monkeys and wild elephants; rising to receive each and every one that visits you—these fourteen evils should be carefully avoided by the king; I hope you do so. The ten evil habits—hunting, gambling, sleeping during the day, scandal, the company of women, drink, wasting our time with singers, musicians and dancers and aimless roaming; the

five defences—moats, mountains, forests, deserts and troops; the four means of success against an enemy—conciliation, bribery, dissensions and force; the seven elements of a state—king, minister, kingdom, citadel, treasury, army and friends; the eight sources of national wealth—farming, commerce, forts, dams, elephant-catching, mining, collection of tribute, bringing waste lands under cultivation and erection of buildings; the three Aims of life—dharma, wealth and pleasure; the three sciences—*trayee, varta* and *dandaneeti;* the various means to control our senses; the six political expedients—alliance, war, expedition, halt, seeking shelter and duplicity; the five natural visitations—fire, water, disease, famine and death; the five artificial visitations—officials, robbers, enemies, king's favorites and the king's greed; watching for an opportunity to estrange our enemy's friends from his side, by gratifying their wishes when they have been slighted by him or threatened or angered; the twenty persons to be avoided—boys, old men, invalids, outcasts, cowards, leaders with craven followers, greedy men, leaders with greedy followers, people that are disgusted with the world, sensualists, followers of various counsels, contemners of gods and brahmanas, objects of Divine wrath, idlers that look to God for everything, the famine-stricken, leaders of disorganised troops, absentee rulers, the objects of universal enmity and hatred, persons in the grip of maleficient planetary conjunctions and those who override all truth and Dharma; the five constituents of state—minister, kingdom, fortresses, treasury and army; the *mandala* composed of the twelve kings—centra monarch or *vijigeeshu*, the five kings whose dominions are in the front and the four in the rear of his kingdom, the *madhyama* or intermediate, and *udaseena* or indifferent king;

warfare composed of expedition, array, march and halt; peace secured by sowing dissensions among the enemy or by seeking the help of stronger powers—have you carefully and thoroughly examined every one of the above categories, rejected the undesirable and retained the useful?

Do you take counsel with a cabinet of four or three ministers of the type approved by the sastras and, later on, with every one of them singly?

Does your study of the Holy Scriptures bear fruit in your reverent adoration of the Fires? Does your wealth serve its purpose by contributing to the wants of others and to your own enjoyment? Are your wives faithful and fruitful? Is your life pure and good, in consequence of your having sat at the feet of the great and the learned?

The line of policy I have been trying to explain to you is calculated to secure you length of days, fame and the Aims of life. Is your heart inclined that way? Our sire adopts it as consonant with the principles of virtue and as having the sanction and approval of the great. Do you practise it too?

I trust you partake of sweet and delicious viands with others and not alone, like a glutton. Do you extend help and protection to the friends that expect it of you? If you lay the above precepts to heart, deal your punishments moderately and govern your subjects wisely and justly, treading in the steps of our ancestors, you will, in this life, bring the broad earth under yours sway and when the hour strikes for you to quit this body, your wisdom and holiness will raise you to the Worlds of light". And in this wise did Rama instruct Bharata in the mysteries of a king's duties.

CHAPTER CI.

BHARATA'S TIDINGS.

BHARATA replied to him sadly:" Lord! I have been denied the noble privilege of serving you. I have nothing to do with the kingdom that forms the centre of the royal policy so ably taught by you. Then, how does it serve me, the noble course of life you traced for me? It is a tradition of our house that a junior cannot ascend the throne over the head of the senior. So I entreat you to go back with us to Ayodhya the home of wealth and happiness, instal yourself on the throne of our fathers and confer eternal fame and glory on us and on the line of Ikshwaku. It is only the fool that says 'The king is but a man like any one of us'. But when we perceive that he performs superhuman acts and manages to pursue the Aims of life at the same time we do not hesitate to pronounce him as the Deity incarnate. His Majesty, whom every virtue and excellence rejoiced to adorn and who won the esteem and regard of the good and the great by his zealous performance of yagas and yagnas, has gone back to his seat in heaven when I was on a visit to the king of the Kekayas. Then you were on your way to these forests. Think not that he survived for many days the shock of separation from you. You had barely passed out of Ayodhya accompanied by Seeta and Lakshmana, when grief and sorrow hurried him away from the world of mortals. Foremost of men! it behoves you not to grieve over much. Arise and busy yourself with the funeral rites of our father. We have discharged that duty to him, I and Satrughna. But, it is not enough; for our elders say that 'the funeral offerings of a favorite son

secure to the dear departed undying bliss in the world of the pitris.' It is no secret that His Majesty's love was given to you most. His last words were about you; his soul yearned to behold your fair face; he could not call back his heart that had gone after you; deprived of your sweet presence, too weak to stand the shock of separation from you, he quitted this life, his thoughts full of you."

CHAPTER CII.

FUNERAL RITES.

THE dreadful tidings of his father's death that Bharata brought him, pierced his heart like the vajra of Indra and Rama fell on the earth like a mighty tree of the forest when the woodman's axe lays low its noble head crowned with leaves, flowers and fruits. There he lay, the lord of the world, like a stately elephant that sleeps the sleep of fatigue, when it had enough of playing in the depths of the river and butting down its banks. Seeta, Lakshmana, Bharata and Satrughna sprang forth with hoarse cries to raise him and dashed water on his face. Raghava returned to life and conciousness and with streaming eyes, lifted his voice in piteous lamentation. "Emperor Dasaratha, the foremost and best of kings, has bowed his head to the rod of Time and departed this life; what have I to do with Ayodhya? Who will rule over it hereafter? What did he get in return for all his anxious efforts to call me his son? I was the cause of his grief and I brought him to his death. I was denied the privilege of being at his side during his last moments and rendering him every service that lay in my power; nor was I

in time to perform the funeral rites after his death. Bharata and Śatrughna are more fortunate in that respect. I will not go back to Ayodhya, even after my forest life is over, to the luckless capital widowed of its lord and in the hands of the hydra-headed people. Should I go, who is there to guide my steps on the narrow and perilous path of Right? If I ever happened to do any good or noble act, my sire used to signify his delight and praise me in words of sweet encouragement. When shall I hear such again? Never".

He next turned aside to Seeta and said "My sire had no girl and he lavished all his love and fondness upon *you*, more than your own parents; *that* father-in-law of yours is now with the gods. You ever sought his side, if I happened to chide you or if there was any thing you wanted me to do for you; *that* Dasaratha is now no more, who regarded you as the apple of his eye. No need to ask you whether your grief whelms mine. Whom will you look up to hereafter? Lakshmana! mother you have and brothers, elder and younger, but cruel Fate has rendered you a fatherless orphan. And Bharata is the bearer of the dreadful tidings to us". He sobbed aloud, unable to say more; and every one there wept and wailed piteously.

Then his brothers consoled Rama, the stay of the worlds. "Brother! arise, for we should offer libations of water to the manes of our departed sire". The woeful news of her father-in-law's death opened the floodgates of Seeta's sorrow and she could scare see Rama through her blinding tears. He calmed her grief and said "Lakshmana! I go to offer libations to our noble father. Keep in readiness our dress of bark, oil-cakes of *ingudi* and other necessary articles. Let Seeta lead the way and you follow her; I come last. This is the order

prescribed for this sad procession." There went with the princes, Sumantra, who had served countless generations of the Ikshwakus; of mighty intellect, possessed of stern self-control, his heart was filled with unshaken devotion to Raghunatha, for he was endowed with the Eye of spirit. He led the way to the river, administering comfort and consolation all the while.

They reached the Mandakini flowing fast through flower-laden forests, bathed in a clear, sandy ford and poured libations of water exclaiming "Father! may this water reach you and go to gratify your noble self." Rama sobbed aloud and said "Best and mightiest of monarchs! may this pure and holy water that I offer you with low devotion reach you in the world of the Pitris and gave you deathless content." The brothers then sought another spot and Rama performed the Sapindeekarana sraddha in honour of his sire. He placed oil-cakes of *ingudi* and *badari* upon the *kusa* grass and exclaimed through his sobs "I pray you to accept and derive content from this offering of food that is sweet to us. Gods and Pitris feed with pleasure upon what goes to sustain the mortal that offers worship and adoration to them." They returned to Chitrakoota along the same path and when they stood at the door of the cottage, Rama caught the hands of Seeta and his brothers and filled the air with lamentations, like lions roaring at nights, until the mountain gave back the doleful sounds a hundred fold.

Bharata's troops heard it and a great fear took hold of them. "It seems" cried they "that our prince Bharata has met Ramachandra; this is the sound of their bewailing the death of our late Majesty." They cast aside their weapons and garments and ran towards the place whence the sounds proceeded, all impelled by a

common desire. The higher class rode on horses, elephants or chariots, while others ran afoot. It seemed an age to them since they saw Rama, though it was only a matter of a few days. All eager to behold him, they jostled one another in frantic haste to be present at the meeting of the brothers. The earth gave back the sounds of countless elephants, horses and chariots tearing over it, as if cloud banks clashed against one another in the sky. Elephants, male and female, were frightened thereat and sought refuge in the neighbouring forests, the air heavy with the pungent odour of their rut. Boars, bisons, wolves, panthers, monkeys, tigers, various species of deer and huge snakes fled away in mad terror. Herons, starks, cranes, swans, koils, curlews and water-fowls darkened the air in their flight; the hosts of Bharata darkened the earth.

Then they beheld Sree Rama, the lord of men, of boundless valour and fame, seated on the bare earth and the tears coursed down their cheeks as they reviled and condemned, in no measured terms, Kaikeyi and Manthara. Rama welcomed them as they deserved, with bows, salutations, embraces, blessings, smiles, kind glances and respectful enquiries. Like huge drums beaten incessantly, their clamorous lamentations rose on the air and were given back by the earth, the sky, the mountain caves and the quarters.

CHAPTER CIII.

RAMA AND THE CITIZENS.

MEANWHILE, Vasishtha led the royal ladies to where their sons were. They passed by the Mandakini and beheld the spot where the

princes bathed in the river. Kausalya turned a wan face and streaming eyes to Sumitra and the other women and cried piteously: "This is verily the ford frequented by my darlings who have been driven from the kingdom and have taken refuge here, like homeless outcasts. Sumitra! This is the ford where your son comes to fetch water for my boy on whom he waits assiduously. Humble as the service may appear and lowly, I do not think that it, in any way, lowers your son. The elder brother stands on the same level as the father and all service rendered to him is but so much filial duty discharged, and hence meritorious. This day Bharata will meet Rama and take him back to Ayodhya. This day will see the last of the mean and arduous duties self-imposed upon your gently-nurtured son' Her eyes rested on the balls of the *ingudi* oil-cakes, placed by Rama with a heavy heart on the *kusa* grass spread towards the south, to propitiate the shades of Dasaratha. "Alas!" cried she, "behold the offering duly placed by Rama to our lord, the great-souled king of the Ikshwaku line. Mighty as the gods, undisputed ruler over the broad earth, fitted to enjoy every comfort and luxury, has it come to this that he gets no better food? He, whose aid was invoked by the Lord of the celestials, he, whose rule was acknowledged by the sea-girt world, how could he bring himself to partake of this *ingudi* oil-cake, an utter stranger to him when he lived? What greater reproach than to hear the world remark that Rama, the heir to unbounded power and luxury, offered to the manes of his father *ingudi* oil-cake as food? What prevents my heart from shivering to atoms even after I behold this terrible sight? It is true, after all, that the gods find it pleasant what goes to feed their worshippers". Her friends and companions consoled her

and they resumed their course towards the *asrama* of Rama.

They saw him at a distance seated on the bare earth, like a fallen god, having renounced all luxury and comfort; grief overcame them and found vent in scalding tears and piteous wails. Their ever-dutiful son rose on their approach, advanced to meet them and reverently laid his head at their feet. They brushed away the dust and earth on his back with their flower-soft fingers. Lakshmana came next and, with a heavy heart, saluted them every one and announced himself; they made no difference between Rama and his brother Lakshmana dowered with all graces. Lastly came Seeta, who touched the feet of her mothers-in-law and stood before them with bowed head and tear-stained eyes.

Kausalya embraced her with a fond mother's love and observing her worn out and sad, cried "The only child of the Videha king, the daughter-in-law of the emperor Dasaratha and the dear wife of Ramachandra, I can not explain to myself why you are doomed to face the dangers and difficulties of a dreary forest life. A lotus flower scorched by the summer heat, a faded lily, a statue of gold caked with dust, the moon behind a cloudy wall—these are nothing beside your woe-begone countenance; the grievous sight consumes my heart like a raging fire".

Meanwhile, Rama laid his head at the feet of Vasishtha of blazing spiritual radiance, like Indra reverencing Brihaspati and was asked to take his seat. Ministers, generals, municipal officials and other noble-minded persons seated themselves as became their rank and position. Bharata sat with reverently clasped hands before his brother, whose refulgent glory was but

heightened by the lowly hermit garb, even as Indra in the presence of Brahma. All eyes were turned upon the brothers and all ears were strained to hear the arguments that Bharata would adduce to turn Rama from his purpose. There they sat in the midst of their friends —Rama the soul of truth and dharma, the great-souled Lakshmana and Bharata the perfect embodiment of duty and virtue—like the three Fires in the sacrificial hall, surrounded by the priests and attendants.

CHAPTER CIV.

BHARATA TAKES REFUGE IN RAMA.

RAMA knew, beyond a doubt, that Bharata, out of his supreme devotion, had put away the crown that was secured to him and had come to the forests in lowly hermit garb. He glanced at Lakshmana and said "Bharata! may I know why you are here clad in deerskin and dress of bark?" Receiving no reply, he asked again "Why have you renounced the throne that was within your grasp and have betaken yourself here in hermit garb?" He paused in vain for an answer; then he drew Bharata to himself, clasped the prince to his breast and said "Dear boy! why have you sought me out here, in this sad plight, and your friends and retainers? How is it I see you wan, faded and broken in spirit? I will not be denied".

Thus urged, Bharata spoke back in accents of humility: "Brother! our sire leant his ears to the evil counsel of Kaikeyi and banished you, his eldest born and the best of men, to the forest wastes; he gave me, a younger son, the crown that should descend to you of right. He essayed to do a task that no other even

dreams of doing; and the shock of separation from a beloved son deprived him of his life. Impelled by my mother, he laboured hard to lay up this store of sin that killed his fair fame for ever. The temptress Kaikeyi, that infamous woman, was denied the consolation of getting for me the kingdom upon which she had set her heart. Foul murderess of her husband, she is now a despicable widow. Her hopes shattered, she is consumed by an undying grief that here she reaps but a harvest of sin and infamy; frightful hells yawn to receive her hereafter. I came out of the womb of Kaikeyi and am entitled to a share of the scorn and shame that crown her. That sinful wretch brought me into the world only to ruin me in every way. I snatched the crown from the brows of my brother to whom it belongs of right; I drove him to the dreary woods; the world censures me as having plotted all along to get the throne; and it is my hand that slew my father. You are my only stay and refuge. I cast myself on your mercy. I have none else to stand between me and evil. I entreat you to go back with us to Ayodhya; bring to a happy conclusion the coronation ceremonies that have been so rudely interrupted; seat yourself on the throne of your fathers like the king of the devas in his capital of Amaravati and rule over us long and happily; you will thereby secure my salvation also. These citizens and these royal ladies that are rendered masterless and miserable by the loss of their husband, are here to add their prayers to mine; deign to gratify their wishes. This is the dharma observed by our house till now. You are qualified in every way to protect us. Pray accept the crown and fulfil our long cherished hopes that ever pray for your welfare. Let the earth be rid of her curse of widowhood and shine as the moon in the clear autumn sky. I said

to myself 'Your heart cannot brook to see me shed a tear. Would you behold millions of your subjects, friends, kin and elders weep in sorrow and despair?' and came down here with the army of our kingdom as if on an expedition. You may set aside my prayers. But these ministers and counsellors are grown grey in years, wisdom and dharma; they ever seek your welfare; they have served our house for generations; they have guided our kingdom through great crises; and it becomes you not to slight *their* prayers. I have but to show myself to get from you anything I may desire; I entreated it of you; would I fail? I know that your noble heart will be wrung with remorse and sorrow when you think that you refused to grant my request even after I laid my head at your feet and begged it of you. Till now you used to importune me to express my wishes and grant them as soon; behold! I have myself come to prefer my request to you. Did I not come into the world along with you; and shall I be reduced to the necessity of entreating you? I call myself your brother; but, is it to claim a share of your kingdom? Am I not your disciple, whom you have initiated into the sacred mantras? Nay, not so; a disciple cannot be brought and sold; so, I am your slave. I am sure that my arguments are irresistible. Hence, extend your kindness unto me and grant a favourable ear to my suit. Have you the heart to reject the piteous appeals of these ministers, governors, heads of departments and other citizens?" He laid his head at the feet of Rama and bathed them with his tears.

There he lay on the ground sighing hard as a maddened elephant; but Rama raised him fondly, clasped him to his breast and replied "You are the scion of the noblest house on earth; endowed with every virtue and

excellence, radiant, a strict observer of vows and penances, no one would for a moment dream of associating you with treachery to your brother or unworthy ambition to possess his crown. I see no fault in you, no stain upon your fame and valor. You do ill when you revile and blame, out of ignorance, the lady that bore you. Our elders extend their love and affection to such of their wives and children as find a place in their heart; and it were vain task to prevent it. The wise hold that sons and disciples are as much amenable to the authority of their parents and teachers as their wives; you cannot deny it. Our sire has as much power to command me to enjoy the comforts and luxuries of a royal life as to dwell in the forests, clad in the garb of hermits. Our devotion and respect are due to our mother equally well as to our father. How can I transgress the orders of my righteous father and mother to dwell in the woods? The emperor has, before all the world, laid his commands upon us that you should wear the crown and rule at Ayodhya and that I should spend fourteen years in the forests, leading the life of hermits. He has now departed to the heaven-world; yet that virtuous king is a law unto you; he is the monarch under whose protection we live in happiness; he is your spiritual guide as of all the world. Hence, it is but just you receive the share he has allotted to you and enjoy it at Ayodhya; it devolves upon me to receive my share and enjoy it in the forests of Dandaka for fourteen years. Honored by all, rivalling Indra in might and power, Dasaratha, our father, has in no doubtful terms intimated to me his pleasure; and I sincerley believe that it will conduce to my highest good here and hereafter. I desire not the sovereignty of all the worlds ever created, if I have not my father's commands thereto".

CHAPTER CV.

BHARATA'S DHARMA.

WHILE those noble princes were thus conversing, the night passed away and ushered in a new day.

They repaired to the Mandakini to perform their matin prayers and assembled again before Rama. When every one had seated himself, Bharata rose and said: "Brother! You may argue that you cannot interfere with the orders of the emperor, who made a gift of this kingdom to Kaikeyi on my account. I was not forgetful of this; I knew that my object could not be achieved if I did not secure the consent of Kaikeyi; so, I persuadded her, and not lightly, to forego her claims. Say not 'It is wrong of you to divert the gift of your father to other uses than he contemplated. But am I not your slave? Do not the sastras proclaim that 'a slave owns no property'? The kingdom bequeathed to your slave goes to you. So, accept your own and reign over us long and happily. Say not, 'You may do it as well'. As the winter-floods bring down the strong banks of rivers and lakes, it is hopeless for any other to rule over this kingdom in your absence. What a world of difference between a horse fleet as the wind and a slow donkey! The mighty Garuda and a linnet—what have they in common? Blessed are they who form the stay and support of others; miserable is the life of him who ever looks up to others for everything in life.

"There was a gardener who planted a seed in a fertile soil and devoted all his time and care to the rearing of it. In good time, the seed sprouted; it became a plant; it grew into a mighty tree that hid the earth and the sky with its dense foliage. No dwarf or

weakling or coward dare go up among its branches. It was almost invisible beneath its mantle of flowers. But if it bore no fruit, not a single one, just imagine the cold misery of him who planted it and reared it so carefully, all expectant to enjoy the fruit of his labours. Brother! this illustration applies to you. It will be an insult to your intellect, if I offer an interpretation of it.

"You are our lord, our master, our protector; do you not fail in your duty if you do not watch over our safety? Grant our citizens and their leaders the pleasure and privilege of beholding you crowned in all glory and installed on the throne of the Ikshwakus, resplendent as the myriad-rayed Lord of the day. Let maddened elephants follow in your wake trumpeting wildly. Let the royal ladies and their women welcome you with joy." And the countless citizens gathered there expressed their approval of what he said and praised him high.

Rama, of supreme self-control over his thoughts and emotions, observed the noble Bharata lament his fate and said to himself "My brother is grieved overmuch that I do not accede to his request. He blames himself as the cause of my exile to the forest and of the sad death of the emperor. I should console him in any way and disabuse him." Then aloud: "Dear boy! you seem to have concluded that our sire drove me to the woods at the instance of Kaikeyi. Neither you nor she are in any way the cause of it; it is all the work of Destiny. No one is absolutely free to do as he likes. Here and in other worlds, Destiny binds the impotent ego and leads him where it wills. A little thought upon the nature of things will convince us that it is vain to stay the course of nature; so, it does not become us to bewail the death of our father. You may accumulate

wealth without limits; yet, it disappears at some time or other, thanks to the vigilant efforts of thieves, women and kings. Brahma, Indra and others, occupying exalted positions in the government of the universe, are dethroned at the end of their day of power. Our union with wife, son and friend is simply the precursor of our separation from them after a time. The most fortunate life should sometime end in death. Our sire bowed to the law of the world and departed this life. It is utterly useless to bewail it. Did I not tell you that it was the hand of Fate that sent me to the woods and my father to heaven? We but waste our time in grieving over either. Fruits ripen but to drop to the ground; man is born but do die; there is no greater danger, no greater fear. A noble mansion with foundations let deep into the earth, with strong walls and pillars that seem to defy the hand of Time, serves its purpose for long years and gradually falls to ruin; even so, men are gradually undermined by disease, age and care and are swept away by the torrent of death; yesternight comes not back. The roaring flood of the Yamuna falls into the sea; can you call it back? Day succeeds day, and night follows night, and each midnight sees another uncared-for—but nevertheless tangible—portion of our life cast aside into the dust-bin of Eternity; yet it fails to strike us that we have missed anything. Our short span of years imperceptibly vanishes, even as the fierce rays of the summer sun scorch up shallow pools of water. Idle or busy, active or passive, running or sleeping, we cannot stay the march of time. Why grieve for others, when our hands are full with our own griefs? There is no armour against Fate. Death walks by our side: Death sits with us; Death accompanies us on all our journeys. The snows of

age lie heavy upon our heads; our blood runs slow; our skin in one huge network of wrinkles; our hair whitens as if it was the bleached skeleton of Youth; Age kills us by inches. What shall we do to escape these unnumbered miseries? The rising sun fills us with joy at the prospect of taking up our hunt for riches where we left it yesterday. The setting sun fills us with joy at the prospect of taking up our pursuit of pleasure where we left it yesterday. But we see not that one day has gone from our short span of life, as the water in a leaky vessel diminishes imperceptibly. So it behoves us to perfect ourselves in the science of Self even in our youth; but Ignorance leads our steps astray. Our life is utterly barren of everything that could secure a blissful state to us hereafter. Every season bears a message to us of its joys and pleasures, but no whisper or hint of our life being the shorter for it. Men come together only to part; it is the inevitable order of things and it is utterly just. The waves bear towards each other two pieces of drift-wood from the ends of the earth; they float together for a time; and the same waves bear them away from one another, never again to meet. Even so, it is but natural that wife and son, friend and wealth are brought into contact with us for a time only to be taken away from us. They are bound to perish. No one can have his own way in this world with any of the above objects. Hence, your wild grief stays not the hand of Death. A large caravan is proceeding on its journey and picks up a lonely traveller on the way; even so we go the way of our fathers, grandfathers and their ancestors. We *cannot* fall out of it; then why waste grief over it? Drop by drop, the waters of the river vanish into the ocean depths; even so every moment takes us nearer the hall of Death; too well do

we know that the Past is irrevocable; then what shall we do? Why, lay up the dharma that enables us to reap a golden harvest of eternal and unparalleled happiness and peace; and we know that the people's hearts are always drawn thereto.

"The emperor, our father, was the soul of dharma; there is no yaga nor yagna that he failed to perform, with ample fees and presents; hence he has put away his sins from him and glories in his seat on high. Sure refuge of his servants and retainers, he governed his subjects according to his best lights and took but lawful tribute of them; so he richly deserves his elevation to the heaven-world. His acts had the approval of himself and of his people; roads, reservoirs, temples and gardens beyond count, entitle him to take his place among the gods. He stayed in this world long, long beyond the years of mortal men; he ran through the whole gamut of a happy and noble life; and it is but right that Paradise should be the next scene of his activities. He left no desires behind him to gratify; he bowed his proud head to none lower than Time, the omnipotent. It is utterly unreasonable, nay, absurd, to grieve for him. He has cast aside this vile body of corruption and revels in the bliss of a glorious body, angelic might, wisdom and radiance. No man of sense would ever waste his tears over such a one, and it is all the more unbecoming of you, supremely intelligent, profoundly versed in the lore of your age and with the noblest minds of the earth for your teachers. It is quite inconsistent with your powerful intellect to grieve and lament about our sire's demise and my exile to Dandaka. Banish care and anxiety; go back to Ayodhya; discharge your duty to your subjects. You are a skilful master of the art of persuasive eloquence and can marshal many an

argument to back your views; but this much I know—it is your bounden duty to carry out the behests of our father. Never harbor, for a moment, the base unworthy suggestion that ignorance or weak-mindedness prompted him to act so. I, on my part, will do my very best to fulfil the commands of that virtuous king. He is our nearest of kin; he is the father who begot us; he is the guru who opened our eyes to God and Truth; is it just that I should slight his express commands? I came to this forest in obedience to the mandates of that pious king. Do you seek to attain angelic beatitude hereafter; do you seek to walk here in the way of the great; do you seek to lay up dharma; do you seek to gather all created beings to your compassionate heart? Then, I can solemnly assert that this is the *only* path to it. Study carefully the life of our father; ponder deeply on his commands; and rule wisely and well over the kingdom he has entrusted to your charge". Thus did Rama, in words pregnant with many a meaning, instruct Bharata in the dharma of honoring a father's word; he impressed upon him the necessity of carrying it out in practice, and kept silent for a muhoorta, to allow time for his words to sink deep into the heart of his brother and bear golden fruit there.

CHAPTER CVI.

BHARATA RENEWS HIS PRAYERS.

AND to him replied Bharata: "The countless worlds hold no one that could take his stand by your side, prince of heroes that you are. Adversity is never known to affect you in the least; nor, prosperity has any chance to elate your spirit. The good and the

great are eloquent in your praise as omniscient; yet, every now and then you appeal to them to solve your doubts. Love and hate cease with death; it is wise to have nothing to do with them even in life. You cannot desire or shun a myth, a non-existing thing; it is well to preserve the same attitude towards existing things too; for, pleasure and pain affect him not. You ask 'Why grieve so when you know it'? My heart spoke out, unable to witness your plight. These reverses have no power to shake the soul of one who has gauged the mysteries of the Individual and the Supreme Self. I know that you are such a one; but, when I come think upon your exile from the kingdom, your lowly abode in the forest and the loss of your presence to me, my heart is filled with boundless sorrow. Mighty as the Lord of the celestials, great-souled, of perfectly attuned nature, you secure the welfare of those that seek you, here and hereafter, with your wise instruction and guidance. Of unshaken fortitude, ever known to keep your word, your unclouded vision ranges through the past, the present and the future. Of unrivalled intellect and perfect in every science and art, the beginning and the end of all beings have no mysteries for you. And it is supremely unjust, nay, atrocious, that such noble excellences should bear such a terrible fruit. My mother sinned grievously on my account when I was away and bequeathed to me an inheritance of woe and evil. I pray you, out of your sweet compassion, to pardon it. The bonds of dharma bind me tight; else, my hand would have, ere now, slain that sinful cruel mother of mine who so richly deserves it. I am the son of Dasaratha, who is born of a pure lineage and knows not what sin is; I have dived into the depths of the mysteries of dharma; shall I soil my hands with a crime condemned by every being?

"Dasaratha deserves our respect; virtuous, hoary with age, he is our king, our father, a god unto us; it is utterly unjust to speak evil of the dead. But, to think that any person with a thorough knowledge of dharma and adharma could perpetrate this frightful sin prompted by lust, all to win a smile of a woman! 'Heaven confounds the hearts of those whom it would destroy' say the wise; and the last act of Dasaratha but confirms our faith in it. Our father lent himself to this act of injustice through fear of Kaikeyi's anger or enslaved by his mad love for her, or powerless before her obstinacy. We look to you for some remedy that the whole world might benefit and rejoice. A son deserves his name when he brings the footsteps of his father back to the path of Right whence they have strayed. We pray you to be such a son. It is not right that you look upon with unconcern, while our father commits a sin that runs against the world, dharma and the esteem of the wise. We look to you to protect us—Kaikeyi, myself, our father, friends, kin and subjects. What has a forest life to do with the duty of a king? What have they in common, a hermit's matted hair and a monarch's crown? It is not right that you undertake to do a thing that has no precedent at any time or anywhere. You may say that 'Kings have ere now adopted the life of recluses'. But the first duty of a king is to rule over his subjects; and towards that he should get himself crowned. You would fain neglect the dharma of a king that is plain, tangible, the source all happiness and power here and endless good hereafter, to follow the dharma of a hermit that is foreign to your nature and position. Besides, a slight mistake, a little slip in it, is enough to deprive you of the fruits of your labours; even if you carry it out perfectly, it is all

uncertain' when you will reap the reward. Nor is there any authority to enjoin it as the first duty of a kshatriya. You are probably the only exponent of this school. Difficult, very difficult is the task you have set yourself. You might as well utilise that energy in watching over the interests and welfare of the four castes. Experts in the mysteries of dharma hold that a householder's life is the best of the four orders. What you do not know about dharma is not worth knowing. Then, why should you deliberately turn your back upon the householder's life ?

"I came into the world after you ; you stand above me in age, in knowledge and, according to the dharma of the kshatriyas, in the right to wear tbe crown. Is it consonant with reason and justice that I rule this world during your life ? Is it possible ? Well, can I survive you ? It is supremely audacious of me to seek to argue it with you. This vast empire, till now ruled over by our father, is blessed with peace and prosperity ; rule over it and bring happiness and comfort to the hearts of your kinsmen and citizens. Vasishtha and the other maharshis, the officers of the state and the people pray with one voice that you should be crowned here. Let these forests be the scene of your installation ; return with us to Ayodhya to rule over your children, like Indra returning to his capital with his Maruts from a tour of victory through the worlds. Discharge the three obligations to the gods, to the fathers and the sages ; annihilate your foes ; gratify every wish, every desire of your friends ; reign over us to the end of time. Let your friends rejoice to behold your brows crowned with the diadem of the Ikshwakus ; let your enemies' hearts be filled with dismay at the tidings and drive them to hide their diminished heads in the dark forests. Cause

the world to forget the outrageous sin of my mother and wash the soul of our father pure of any stain. Like unto Mahavishnu, extend your mercy to me, to our kin and to all beings. But, if you put my words away and resolve to continue your hermit's life, why, you will find me ever at your side". Thus did Bharata seek to turn Rama from his resolve; but, a father's word was all sacred in the eyes of Raghava and he had no thought of going back to Ayodhya. This wonderful loyalty to his word saddened the hearts of his subjects, for, Ayodhya was not to know him for ten years and four; but, equally great was their joy that his plighted word was so faithfully kept. The priests, the heads of clans and the royal ladies cheered Bharata and, with tear-stained eyes and bleeding hearts, entreated Rama to go back with them.

CHAPTER CVII.

RAMA'S REPLY.

BHARATA'S arguments, entreaties, praises and grief moved not Rama who said, "It speaks well of you to say so, son of the virtuous king Dasaratha and Kaikeyi. You do him mighty wrong to censure our father that he set his hand to this injustice, out of a blind passion for Kaikeyi. It seems that he was not led astray in this by any unworthy motive. Of yore, when he took Kaikeyi to wife, he promised her father that 'he would place the crown on the head of the son that she would give him.' Lateron, during the battle between the gods and the asuras, he gave her two boons in gratitude for a great help she rendered him. She bound him by a promise to that effect and prayed t you might get the crown and that I might be sent

to the forests. Accordingly, his majesty ordered me to spend fourteen years in the forest. So, you find me, Lakshmana and Seeta in this lovely Dandaka in obedience to the behests of the king.

"You but waste your time in seeking to prevent me. Rather go back to Ayodhya and crown yourself; you would please our father better and obey him. You should discharge, for my sake at least, the debt that the emperor owes to Kaikeyi. You gain thereby the merit and glory of having gratified the hearts of your parents. Let me repeat to you the words of the emperor Gaya on filial duties when he was conducting a yaga at Gaya. 'A son is called *putra* since he saves (*trayati*), his father from the hell *put*. Swarga and the worlds of light are gained by offering gifts in his name. Let us pray that we get many virtuous sons and wise. For, some one of them might make offerings to us at the sacred Gaya.'

"The royal sages, our ancestors, held the same view so save our father from hell. Go back to Ayodhya with Satrughna and the other brahmanas and govern our subjects wisely and well. I and mine will take our way to the woods of Dandaka. King of *men* you shall be; king of the *forest world* I am. Return to *Ayodhya* with a cheerful heart; I proceed to *Dandaka* as cheerfully. The snow-white *umbrella* of state will shut out the sun's rays from your head and give you a cool and refreshing shade; the hospitable *trees* hereabouts will protect me from the heat of the sun. The keen-witted Satrughna will manfully aid you in your work of government; Lakshmana will watch over me during my term of self-effacement. Thus shall we, the four sons of our father, enable him to keep his word pure. Grieve not."

CHAPTER CVIII.

JABALI THE MATERIALIST.

BHARATA remained silent; then, maharshi Jabali, one of the priests of Dasaratha, spoke to Rama as an advocate of the creed of the *charvakas*, albeit his heart was ever centred upon the prince's highest good. "Rama! noble of heart, mighty of intellect, it become you not to speak aimlessly like one of the common herd. What are our kith and kin? What has one man to profit by another? Clear thought would answer us *No*. Alone we come into the world and alone we go out of it. It is but a fool that clings to another as his father, mother or they that bore him. How does one man stead another? We start for a neighbouring village, halt for the night at another, and resume our journey on the morrow; even so, father, mother, home and wealth are but halting places on the great journey through eternity. The wise are never lured by these. A traveller taking his rest for a while in a caravanserai on the way, only to leave it a few hours later, has no concern about it; even so, our parents should occupy our thoughts only during their contact with us; it is a waste of useful thought-power to concern ourselves for them even after they have left us. Who would trouble himself to please them? You inherit your father's kingdom. You spurn it away and adopt a hermit's life unsuited to your youth, pregnant with many a danger and unsanctioned by the sastras. A faithful wife finds no pleasure during her husband's absence in dresses, jewels and perfumes; she appears sad and miserable; even so, Ayodhya, the home of wealth and comfort, is racked by unspeakable woe and eagerly awaits your arrival. Hence, go back to

Ayodhya as soon as you can and ascend the throne of your fathers. Reign over the broad realms of Kosala in all pomp and power, like Indra in the heaven world. What is Dasaratha to you ? Nay, what are you to him? Why should you you call him your father ? You have nothing in common with him. Take my advice. It is but an idle tale that the father begets the son; rather the sperm and the germ that come together from the bodies of the man and the woman when they are in season. The form known as Dasaratha has played the part assigned to it and has been dissolved into its original elements. Such is the fate of all. It is but ignorance that makes you vainly grieve for Dasaratha with whom you claim a relation.

" It pains my heart to see persons labour to accumulate wealth, or, lay up dharma to secure a happy hereafter, instead of directing their energies to the attainment of a happy life here. Hard is their lot and miserable in this life; equally hard is their fate in the others. Take this as an illustraiion of the futility of labouring to acquire merit. Is it not a sheer waste of good material, the food used in the Ashtaka and the Samvatsara sraddhas ? Has any one seen the dear departed come down to feed of it ? If what one eats could find its way into the body of another and satisfy his hunger, we would find it very easy to keep our friends abroad in food and drink by distributing them to persons around us, in their name. It is the crafty-knaves that framed such rules as 'Perform yagas and yagnas; give away in charity; lead a life of control and restraint; worship the gods; let no desires bind you to wife and child, wealth and corn.' Some sharp-witted fellows set such snares to trap fools and ease them of their wealth.

"It surprises me to see such a bold and clear intellect as yours believe in a future state. There is no such thing as a hereafter; it is a pure myth. If you carry out the behests of your father in this world, how does it stand to reason that a happy life awaits you both in the other? There is no truth, no reality except what we gain through perception; hold on to it. This kingdom and the power, the wealth and the luxury that it brings are perceptible, are real, are substantial; make them yours. My counsel will be acceptable to every one in this world; accept it too, grant the prayers of Bharata and sit on the throne of your fathers."

CHAPTER CIX.

THE REFUTATION.

RAMA was the first and foremost of the champions of truth; ever zealous in the discharge of his religious duties, his heart was not upset in the least by the plausible speech of Jabali.

"I confess" replied he "that you spoke these words that I might enjoy what I hold most dear. But, there are really unsound and dangerous to me, albeit they wear the mask of justice and a deep concern about my welfare. Your teachings are subversive of the vedic truths; you walk in the way of sin; you are a law unto yourself; you are beyond the pale of the regard of the good and the great; but, you are sure of the scorn and censure of all beings. His conduct towards others is the best index of a man's high lineage, valor, purity or otherwise. Should I parade myself as a pure man and a good, endowed with every excellence and virtue; should I assume the garb of holiness, philanthropy and

altruism; should I turn my back upon the dharma taught by the vedas that is the source and fount of every good; should I advocate promiscuity and confound the castes and the orders of life; should I practise dharma as you teach it, but which is only adharma graced by no vedic rites or vedic injunctions; what man of discrimination or intellect would hold me in esteem? Would I not deserve their censure as a wicked wretch, who has dedicated himself to the task of ruining the world?

"Let this be. What hope have I of a happy hereafter, if I follow your creed and falsify my word to lead a forest life? A fine teacher I would make! What steps shall lead me to the glorious worlds on high? Your system would surely deprive every one in this world of all hopes of a future. Like master, like man. If I enthrone Pleasure as the aim of life and worship it all devoutly, I but set the pace for my countless subjects. Freed from all restraint, the whole world will go to rack and ruin.

"The immemorial dharma of kings is characterised by truth and compassion; this world of ours is based upon Truth; sages and gods hold truth to be the most precious thing. He who never turns his back upon Truth rises to the highest state; a liar is shunned and feared as though he were the deadliest serpent. Truth is the highest dharma; heaven is rooted in Truth; God is but Truth; every thing good and great follows Truth; nay, Truth is the substratum of all. There is nothing higher than Truth; gifts, yagas, fire-offerings, tapas and the vedas depend upon Truth. Hence, we should follow Truth. He who walks in the way of Truth rules this world and lives in heavently bliss hereafter. He who strays from the path of Truth feeds

but his wife and children; frightful hells welcome him hereafter.

I am a follower of Truth; I have given my word to Kaikeyi to renounce the kingdom and dwell in the woods; why should I not carry out my father's commands? I will not go back upon my word through ambition or ignorance or sophistry or meanness. I have been taught that the fickle-minded fool who eschews Truth worships the Gods and the Fathers but in vain. I know from experience that Truth is the most natural attribute of our self. The life of a hermit has the sanction of usage by the good and holy; it is dear to me as the surest means to secure the same noble ends. I approve not of this kingly dharma that is in reality adharma with a thin varnish of dharma. I leave it to mean, sinful, cruel and ambitious men. An untruth has behind it our thoughts, words and acts. We ponder deeply, we give expression to it in words and we crystalise it in action. Power, fame, esteem and wealth wait upon the loyal adherent of Truth; they follow in his wake who has raised himself by Truth to heaven. Hence, it is all imperative to hold fast to Truth.

"The wise and the great look with no favourable eye upon the dharma that you took so much pains to teach me, saying 'This is the noblest path; this is a sure giver of good; set your feet on it.' I have pledged myself to my father to make my home in the forest; with what face shall I repudiate it and take back the kingdom at the request of Bharata? Would her heart have rejoiced if Kaikeyi was not assured of my loyalty to my word? Right joyfully shall I live in these wilds, pure and strictly observant of the rules and duties enjoined upon an anchorite; I shall gratify the Gods and the Fathers with offerings of fruits, roots,

flowers and other woodland wealth; I shall keep my senses far away from sin. Right discrimination, thorough earnestness and candour shall characterise my life here.

"Agni, Vayu, Soma and other gods were once denizens of this mortal world like ourselves; their tapas and merit have raised them to the glorious positions they now occupy. A hundred yagas is the price of his place, the glorious Being who now occupies the throne of heaven. Maharshis have won the Worlds of light through stern austerities. Truth, dharma, fortitude, compassion, sweet speech and reverence to brahmanas, gods and guests pave the way to the Worlds of bliss—so say the Great Ones of our land. The brahmanas have realized the inner mysteries of this doctrine: with one voice, with one heart, they observe the duties of their castes and orders all carefully; and look forward confidently to a hereafter in swarga and other angelic spheres.

"Your heart, your intellect, is antagonistic to the path of dharma taught by the vedas; you seek to teach your soul-destroying materialism wherever you can. You are a heretic *charvaka* in the garb of an orthodox *vaidika*. It grieves my heart to think that my father thought fit to engage you for his priest, may be all unawares of your being the greatest danger to his state in every way. Know that from this moment I have deprived you of all your religious functions. I will allow no one in my kingdom who is a crass materialist owning no other god but Perception. A Bauddha is synonymous with a robber; I see no difference between a Bauddha and an atheist. I hold that a wise man should part company with one, the moment he suspects him of disloyalty to the dharma of the vedas.

The lives of the Great Ones are the best evidence to us that dharma ensures our highest good here and hereafter. Sons of wisdom, too numerous to count, have walked in the way of dharma in the past; wealth and power, honor and fame, nay, every thing that the heart could desire was theirs to command in the world of men; and they have been raised to the lofty positions of Lords of planets and solar systems. Right action is the surest means to secure us everything we would have in this world and in the next; hence, brahmanas zealously perform yagas, yagnas, tapas, charity and other auspicious acts; hence it is we find that the rishis are wedded to dharma; they seek the company of the good; bright, stainless, worthy of all respect and eschewing all evil, they are crowned with such enviable excellences as self-sacrifice, compassion and godliness". Ramachandra, who came down among men to restore the dharma of the vedas, could not suffer himself to listen to the heretical words of Jabali, that subverted the Holy Scriptures; he answered with wrath—an unusual thing with him. Then Jabali conciliated him and explained his apparent materialistic attitude. "When dharmic crises come about, a student of all creeds should adopt any one of them and remove the danger. I have but acted upon this time-honored dictum. Now this kingdom is on the brink of a grave danger through anarchy; and it is best avoided by persuading you anyhow to accept the crown. That is why I posed myself as a materialist; but I am not one; it is not my mission to preach their nefarious doctrines. I am not one that denies a future state. When I argue with materialists who take refuge in sophistries, I meet them on their own ground and prove that their system is hollow and soul-killing.

If occasion demands it, I put on the mantle of the most rabid and fanatical member of their sect. *This* is such an occasion; so, I spoke as an ardent atheist Besides, it is now imperative that I should convince the world that your heart is deeply rooted in the vaidika dharma. Again, you grieved to see your dear Bharata grieve; and I owe it to him to cheer him a bit. Hence this most unlikely *role* for one of the most loyal adherents to the dharma of the Aryas.

CHAPTER CX.

THE RACE OF THE SUN.

VASISHTHA hastened to pacify Rama and said, "Jabali is no materialist; he believes, because he knows directly, that there is a rebirth and a future state for all beings. He spoke thus to persuade you to return to Ayodhya. Lord of worlds! It would be insulting your omniscience if I crave your patient hearing of the origin and the evolution of this system of worlds down to our present time.

"In the beginning there were but the Waters of Space; and from it evolved Prithvi. Next Brahma the self-born, appeared and the devatas (rulers). Later on, Narayana brought up this earth from the Waters, assuming the form of a boar; and from him and his progeny evolved the whole creation. The four-faced Brahma came from Brahman, otherwise named Akasa. He is *eternal* in his official capacity, as devata after devata succeeds to the place without a break. He is longer-lived than the other egos and hence relatively *permanent*. He is on the next step to Liberation and hence *inmortal*. From him descend father and son—Mareechi, Vivaswan,

and Vaivasvata Manu the founder of the line called by the name of his son Ikshwaku. The latter was the first monarch of the solar race and received the sovereignty of the earth from the Manu. He was the first of those that ruled at Ayodhya. Then Vikukshi, Bana, Anaranya (in whose time famines and robbers were things unknown as also droughts), Prithu, Trisanku (who was raised to heaven through his loyalty to truth), Dundhumara, Yuvanasva, Mandhata, Susandhi, Dhruvasandhi and his brother Prasenajit, Bharata (the son of the former) and Asita. The Haihayas, Talajanghas and Sasibindus defeated him in battle and drove him from his kingdom. He retired to the solitudes of the forests and performed tapas there waited upon by his two wives who were *enceinte* at the time. One of them poisoned the food of the other to put her out of the way. Kalindi, the innocent victim, rendered reverent service to Chhyavana, the son of Bhrigu, who was engaged in a course of tapas on the hill. The sage read the wish of her heart to be the mother of a noble prince and said, "Child! at no distant date you will be the mother of a boy, virtuous, great-souled, valiant and pure, who will continue your line on earth." She touched the feet of the saint and took her leave. After a time she gave birth to a beautiful boy of dazzling lustre. As he was born into the world along with the poison administered to him in the womb, he was named Sagara, *poisoned*. He it was that caused the ocean to be dug that rises with dreadful clamour of waves when the moon calls out to her. His son was Asamanjas who was exiled by his father for his wickedness. From him decended in order Amsuman, Dileepa, Bhageeratha, Kakutstha (whence the name Kakutsthas), Raghu (whence the name Raghavas), Pravriddha (who was also named

Kalmashapada and Saudasa, cursed to be a cannibal for a time), Sankhana, (who was destroyed along with his army by his father when the latter was a rakshasa under the curse), Sudarsana, Agnivarna, Seeghraga, Maru, Prasusruka, Ambareesha, Nahusha, Nabhaga, Aja and Suvrita (brother); Dasaratha son of Aja; and yourself his eldest born, whom men know as Rama.

"So, accept the crown that is yours by right and rule over your subjects. The eldest born inherits the throne in the house of Ikshwaku; and the junior has no claim to it during the life of his brother. This is the royal tradition of the Raghavas. You do ill to be the first to violate it. No one but yourself can hold sway over this broad earth, the mother of numerous empires teeming with wealth, corn, gems and other excellent products. You are our king after Dasaratha".

CHAPTER CXI.

THE LAST WORD UPON IT.

RAMA preserved a dignified silence when Vasishtha laid before him the dharma of his house; for, he said to himself "My father's word is more imperative". The sage read his heart and replied "Three gurus has every man—the teacher, the father and the mother. The latter give him his body of flesh; the *acharya* builds for him his body of wisdom and hence stands higher than the parents. I was the acharya of your ancestors; I am your acharya. Follow my counsel and you will not swerve from the path of the good. Rule justly and wisely over these brahmanas, kshatriyas, citizens and your other subjects and you will conform to the traditions of your forefathers. 'The mother

stands infinitely higher than the father', say the Books; hence, you do ill not to wait upon your aged and virtuous mother. You follow in the footsteps of the great and the good when you reverence her word. Again, Bharata who entreats you with his head at your feet—is he not dear to you as your own life? Would you reject his earnest prayers? Is it not the brightest gem in your crown that you never abandon those that seek your shelter? You say that you have promised to yourself not to go back upon truth and dharma; but, have you forgot your other promise, equally sacred, that you do not refuse your mercy and protection to those that seek it of you?" Thus did the holy Vasishtha place before him the duty of kings.

Rama was prompt with his reply. "The righteous man walks in the way of righteousness as long as his body serves him faithfully. The father gives us that body; he loads us with countless benefits even after we are come to years of mature wisdom. I hold, in consequence, that his word weighs with us more than that of the guru; its binding force is greater. The Scriptures say 'Your mother is a god unto you; your father is a god unto you; your acharya is a god unto you'. They place the acharya *after* the parents. These perform countless fasts, penances, pilgrimages and propitiatory rites to the gods to be blessed with a son; they feed and clothe him; they watch over him with infinite patience during his infancy, childhood, boyhood and youth; they lavish all their love and care upon him; and no one can hope to discharge his debt to them though he devote countless lives to the task.

"Now, the emperor is my father; he gave me this body; his commands come first and my promise to him; my mothers's behests and Bharata's entreaty but came

after. Now, shall I allow my father's word to go for nothing?"

Bharata's heart was sore to think it was to no purpose that he begged the crown from Kaikeyi for Rama. So he turned to Sumantra that sat near and said "Look sharp and spread the kusa grass here; I will fast till my brother grants my prayer. The creditor fasts, with covered head, at the door of the recalcitrant debtor; even so I stretch myself across the threshold of my brother's cottage till he returns with me to Ayodhya." Sumantra cast a hesitating glance at Rama to take his order from the prince; which observing, Bharata spread the grass himself and lay on them.

This displeased Rama who cried "My dear Bharata! how have I wronged you that you seek to coerce me with such terrible measures? It is enjoined on the brahmanas to lie on one side all the time and force the obstinate debtor to pay him his dues; the kshatriyas are denied that remedy. Best of men! give up this horrible penance and go back to Ayodhya as soon as you can."

But Bharata sat up and asked the people "Why do you not add your prayers to mine?" And they replied "We know full well that Rama never goes back upon his word. He speaks reason. He would abide by the commands of his father and carry them out; and it is impossible to make him act otherwise". Rama took it up and said, "Take counsel of these who hearts are ever wedded to dharma and to your welfare. Add to it my own advice and come out of that bed of grass. Cleanse yourself of the stain of taking upon yourself a duty that belongs to a higher order by sipping pure water and touching me. Why *me* in preference to such saints as Vasishtha? You take an oath upon me not to do repeat your folly."

Bharata did so and addressed the assembled multitude: "Brahmanas, ministers, civic heads and citizens! lend me your ears. I never hankered after this crown even in my dreams; nor did I at any time advise Kaikeyi to this course. I never uttered a wish that Rama, my revered and virtuous brother, should be exiled to the woods. If it is agreed on all hands that His Majesty's commands are to be obeyed and that by leading a life in the forests, I undertake to do so for fourteen years in place of Rama and let him take my place on the throne at Ayodhya. Both of us would have well kept our father's commands".

The reply took Rama by surprise and he said "I nor Bharata has any power to cancel, repudiate or modify any arrangements His Majesty makes—sale, purchase or mortgage. He bought of me the kingdom that was mine of right and paid me the price of it in the shape of forest life. Have we any power to alter it? It were eternal infamy if I led a forest life by proxy. Purification by mantras is allowed only when the man is too ill to bathe in cold water. I should rightly look out for a substitute when I am disabled; else my father's words go for nothing. Kaikeyi spoke right and the emperor acted right. None knows it better than Bharata. He is a model of patience and loyal service to elders. Straight of speech and noble of heart, he ever sets the highest good of all as the goal of his actions. The good Lakshmana is here to assist me during my residence in Dandaka; you may depend upon me to return to Ayodhya at the end of the period and receive the crown. Kaikeyi requested His Majesty to grant her the boons and I try my best to keep my promise to her. Follow my advice and save our sire from the sin of an untruth."

CHAPTER CXII.

RAMA'S SANDALS.

THE maharshis present were filled with surprise and joy to hear the brothers of unrivalled lustre speak to one another so fondly and lovingly. The royal saints, divine sages, siddhas and gandharvas that stood around, all unseen, said to the princes "Thrice-blessed is he who calls himself the father of these virtuous and valiant princes. We never tire of listening to their discourse."

The rishis took counsel together and resolved to hasten the day when Ravana and his rakshasas would be no more. They said to Bharata "Dear prince, whom high lineage, wisdom, purity and fame vie in crowning! if you desire to secure the highest good to your father, follow the counsel of Rama. Dasaratha discharged his debts to Kaikeyi and earned long eons of heaven-life. We would even have Rama quit of all debts to Dasaratha". It gladdenned the heart of Raghunatha to hear them say so; and they departed to their abodes, duly honored of him.

Bharata was well-nigh broken-hearted at the failure of his earnest prayers; trembling like a leaf, he clasped hands of appeal and cried, "Brother! I pray you accede to my entreaty, bearing well in mind the heavy responsibility of a kingdom and the traditions of our house. I *cannot* rule over this vast empire all alone, unaided; nor can I hope to gladden the hearts of our subjects that have gone after you. Our kinsmen, friends and troops pray for you as farmers pray for the welcome rains. Guide the storm-tossed vessel of state into the haven of safety. It is nothing to you to rule over this broad earth".

Every means, every expedient, every *ruse* that he knew—argument, prayer, entreaty—proved in vain and Bharata was driven to the last resort of taking refuge with Rama; he fell at his feet and prayed. Was it ever known to go for nothing? But, Rama had to slay Ravana in consequence of the prayer of the devatas; here was ready to hand the fourteen years in the Dandaka as his father had commanded him—the likeliest means to bring him nearer to the purpose of his incarnation. Bharata's prayer would be granted next in order; but, it was not in him to wait so long. So, Rama drew him on to his lap to reconcile him to his disappointment. No sooner did he come into contact with the divine body of Rama than Bharata clean forgot his grief, his sorrow and his cares. Dark of hue like a rain-charged cloud, with eyes like lotus-leaves, he spoke in the tones of a maddened swan: "Boy! you are by nature right-minded and have strengthened it by sitting at the feet of the wise. So, it is in you to hold sway over this earth. Take heedful counsel with your ministers, governors, friends and experts." Then he bethought himself that "Bharata had not even now abandoned his idea of taking me to Ayodhya in spite of his being exhorted by me and the devarshis. It behoves me to destroy in him the slightest hope." He continued, "The moon may be shorn of its lustre; the Himalaya may lose its crown of snow; the ocean may overflow its shores; but I will never go back upon my promise to my father. Your mother has done this, may be out of her great love to you, or out of ambition to rule through you. Do not take it to heart too much, but render her your heartiest and most devoted service."

Who ever heard of turning Rama from his purpose, more radiant than the sun? Bharata, who knew better

than others that Rama was the fittest to rule the kingdom wisely and that he deserved best the respect and worship of all beings whose hearts he gladdened as the full moon, followed the advice of maharshi Vasishtha who ever compassed the welfare of himself and Rama and said "Brother! I pray you place your holy feet on these sandals inlaid with gold. They have power to secure every good to all the worlds." Rama granted Bharata's prayer and kept his own promise by doing so. His brother went round them in reverence and raising his hands above his head, took a terrible vow: "Ten years and four shall I stay outside the city gates, clad in the garb of hermits and sustaining my life on woodland fare, my eyes ever on the road that brings you back to Ayodhya. I shall duly report myself to your sandals every day as to how I discharge my duties to the subjects. If, on the first day of the fifteenth year I see you not here, I enter the blazing pyre." "Be it so" replied Rama and clasped Bharata and Satrughna to his breast. "Bharata!" cried he, "watch over your mother carefully and serve her humbly. Banish from your heart all anger where she is concerned. Swear it by me and by Seeta." He gave them leave to depart, his eyes brimming with tears.

Bharata decorated the sandals as well as he could, worshipped them duly and placed them on the state elephant. Meanwhile, Rama, whose steadfast devotion to dharma might well be the despair of the Himalaya, took leave of the rishis, brahmanas, ministers, governors, citizens and princes, according to them due respect and kindness. The royal ladies were choked by their blinding tears and could not give him their parting blessings. Raghunatha saluted them all and entered his cottage in tears, all unmanned.

CHAPTER CXIII.

BHARATA RETURNS TO AYODHYA.

BHARATA placed the sandals on his head with deep devotion and got into his chariot with Satrughna, his face beaming with joy. Vasishtha, Vamadeva, Jabali and other chief ministers travelled before him. They went round the sacred Mandakini and Chitrakoota, hallowed by the presence of Rama and Seeta, and travelled due east along the base of the mountain until they were at the asrama of Bharadwaja.

Bharata descended from his chariot and laid his head at the feet of the maharshi. The sage blessed him and said, "Dear boy! saw you Rama? How did your mission fare?" And Bharata replied "Holy sir! I entreated him in diverse ways and saint Vasishtha was good enough to back me strongly. But he would not be turned from his purpose. He would not break his word to his father. He would abide by it and live in the woods for fourteen years. Then Vasishtha, the wise One, said to him 'Bestow your hearty blessings on these sandals of yours and give them to Bharata. They will materially assist him to govern the kingdom during your absence.' My brother and the maharshi were adepts in the art of speech; so, Rama agreed to it. Facing the east, he placed his feet on these sandals, impregnated them with the power to assist me in governing the kingdom, and handed them to me. His commands are upon me that I should return to Ayodhya with them." Bharadwaja was rejoiced to hear it and exclaimed. "Best of men! Most pure of heart and deed! it is no wonder that water always seeks the lowest

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level. It is no wonder that there dwells in you the dharma of following in the footsteps of the great and abiding by their commands. It is wrong to say that the emperor Dasaratha is dead and is no more when he has a son whose knowledge of the mysteries of dharma is equalled but by his practice of it. The Books speak that 'The father lives for ever through his noble sons;' hence, it is right to say that Dasaratha is immortal." Bharata touched his feet in deep reverence, went round him and took leave of him to proceed to Ayodhya.

They crossed the Yamuna in good time and reached Sringiberapura. From there they travelled on until Ayodhya came in sight. Bharata was filled with unspeakable misery to behold the capital of Kosala widowed of his father and brethren and said to Sumantra "Lo! it seems almost that the town is deserted and in ruins; shorn of its glory and lustre, it gives no sign of life, human or otherwise."

CHAPTER CXIV.

A KINGLESS CAPITAL.

THUS conversing, they entered the city to the thunder of the chariot wheels. Bats and owls darted here and there. Men and elephants lay in a stupor of grief. Like a murky moonless night during the dark half of the month: like Rohini, the bright and favourite spouse of the moon, in the grip of a maleficient planet; like a dried up mountain torrent, its fish and crocodiles faint and dying, and the birds on its banks scorched by the merciless heat; like the sacrificial fire, burning at first

with a smokeless golden flame and gradually dying out under the weight of curds, milk and food offered into it; like a huge army routed by the foe, with its elephants, horses and warriors wounded to death, their armour broken and the war-chariots shivered to atoms; like the roaring ocean with its mountains and valleys of foam-crested billows that had sobbed itself to sleep the sleep of silent exhaustion; like the fire-chamber in a hall of sacrifice, when, after the Soma has been drunk, the priests and the audience leave it with the sacred vessels, to be tenanted but by silence and solitude; like a cow in a herd whose heart has gone after its beloved bull and who turns away with disgust from the fresh sweet-smelling grass laid before it; like a necklet of pearls from which have been removed the gems that lent their lustre thereto; like a star whose merit is on the wane and falls down on the dull earth from its radiant seat among its peers; like a creeper of the woods black with the bees that are attracted by its fragrant spring robes, now in the heart of the cruel forest fires; like the moon and the stars behind the prison-bars of black clouds; like a drinking saloon, roofless, dirty, strewn with shattered bottles and cups, the corpses of its customers lying here and there in horrible postures, the floor cracked and the wines trickling among them; like a water-trough, broken, dilapidated and slowly ebbing away its life-giving waters, with none to slake his thirst thereat; like the string of a mighty bow cut to pieces by the arrows of the enemy; like a fleet war-horse, bestrode by a famous warrior, that lies on the ground hacked to death by the weapons of the enemy, its gay trappings and accoutrements scattered around; like a lovely pool, where large fish and turtles disport themselves, now dried up and shallow, its walls broken and the flowers faded and dying; like

the sun whose bright radiance is hid behind the dark winter-clouds, appeared Ayodya with its silent deserted streets and closed shops.

Bharata drew his charioteer's attention to it and exclaimed, "How is it I hear not the strains of music and song wafted gaily along the breeze? Alas! the air is no longer heavy with the fragrance of rare wines and drinks, aloes, sandal and other perfumes! Horses, chariots and maddenned elephants no longer thunder along the roads of Ayodhya ever since Rama went out of its gates! Young people of both sexes do not deck themselves gaily with scents and garlands but are whelmed with grief! They do not walk about the streets and squares in joyful content! What has become of the numerous festivals, processions and pleasure parties? Is this city in mourning for Rama? Its beauty and glory have departed with my brother. Dark and gloomy it looks, like a night in the bright half of the month when the rain lashes the earth. Would he come again among us, my brother, like a dear thing of joy, and gladden our hearts even as summer clouds that delight all beings? When shall we behold again our young men walk about the streets proudly in gay attire like lordly elephants?" So lamenting, he entered the portals of Dasaratha's palace.

It was repulsive to look at, now that Dasaratha was no more, like unto a large mountain lair when the lion is dead that thundered in it. Once upon a time, the asuras defeated the devas in battle. Rahu absorbed the sun. Day and night were wiped out. Then, Brahma deputed Atri, the maharshi, to illumine the world for seven days; which he did. The mansion was deserted and frightful to look at even as the dark and dull world when the sun was away from it; Bharata of iron

fortitude could not stem the tide of his sorrow and his tears streamed afresh.

CHAPTER CXV.

INSTALLATION OF THE SANDALS.

He left the royal ladies at Ayodhya and, all faithful to his promise, turned to his priests and said sadly, "This day I go to Nandigrama. Pray give me leave. This place serves to heighten my grief. I will take myself away from these scenes and try my best to bear it. His Majesty has gone back to swarga; Rama has buried himself in the woods. My brother of boundless fame is best fitted to rule over this vast kingdom. I will eagerly await his return among us from my outpost without the city".

And to him replied Vasishtha and the other rishis "You speak well and like one who is devoted body and soul to his brother. Your kin find in you a noble and affectionate guardian of their interests. Your brothers are dearer to you. Your virtuous sentiments meet with unanimous approval".

Bharata saluted the royal ladies and set out with Satrughna, while Vasishtha and the other maharshis, brahmanas and priests led the way. Ministers and officers of state followed him as also the troops and the citizens of Ayodhya. They travelled east towards Nandigrama; and when they were there, Bharata got down from his chariot with Rama's sandals reverently placed on his head, and said to those around, "Far from me be the world's censure that 'Kaikeyi conspired to get him the crown under the guise of demanding her boons from Dasaratha. The king consented thereto and Bharata

quietly stepped into his place'. My brother has placed me in charge of this kingdom and I should render it back to him safe and undiminished. I have neither the power, nor the right to govern it. Yon sandals have been impressed with his sacred feet and are endowed with the power to govern and prosper this kingdom more than any other thing". He saluted, with humble reverence, the representative of Rama, entrusted them with the responsibility of government and said to his ministers and citizens, "These be the holy feet of Rama whom the worlds obey and reverence. He is present here. Pay him all reverence, all royal honors, the umbrella of the state and the chauries. These sandals impregnated with the might and greatness of Raghava, my guru, will secure to dharma a more glorious reign. Out of his love to me, he has entrusted me with this kingdom and sent these sandals to represent him. So, I will guard them till his return, even as my life. Fear not; very soon we will see him again. I will place these under his feet and rejoice at the glorious sight. I will transfer the burden of state to him; I will seat him on his throne; I will ever wait at his side and render glad service to him in every way. Then, my sins will fall away from me, every one of them. I will behold the millions of his subjects beside themselves with joy during the coronation of Rama and it will give me infinitely greater pleasure and fame than I could ever hope to get by possessing myself of this empire of Kosala". Thus lamenting, he abode at Nandigrama along with his ministers and occupied himself with the cares of government, heavy of heart.

Clad as a hermit in matted hair, deerskin and dress of bark, he bore in mind the commands of Rama, and installed his sandals with reverence, eagerly expectant

of the day of his return. Supremely devoted to Rama, utterly faithful to his word, he rendered humble report to them of the day's proceedings. Every plan, every scheme and every proposal was first submitted to them. Everything that was given him, rare and precious, was first offered to them. And so did he govern the vast empire, that noble soul, the happy slave of Rama's sandals which gave him power and capacity to discharge his duty.

CHAPTER CXVI.

THE EXODUS OF THE RISHIS

THE hermits in the *asramas* about Chitrakoota led till then a happy life, free from care and anxiety, since Rama was with them. When Bharata had departed for Ayodhya, Rama inferred from their casual remarks and signs that they were apprehensive of some danger and were anxious to seek some other resort. They spoke among themselves in secret, pointing out to Rama with side-long glances and raised eyebrows. They entertained some doubts about him. Rama could not explain it to himself. He sought out the Kulapati or the head and said to him over folded palms, "I beg to submit to your reverence that the hermits hereabouts behave to me rather strangely. May I know why? Did they notice any change in my attitude towards them; or, was Lakshmana guilty of any careless breach of duty; or, was Seeta so much absorbed in her attendance upon me as to omit paying you due attention and respect?"

The head of the colony was a very very old man, lean and emaciated with age and severe tapas. His

limbs shook from weakness. He addressed himself to Rama, whose heart went out in compassion to all creatures, and replied, "It is inborn in her to do good, the highest good to others. Seeta delights in it immensely. The daughter of Janaka, it is absurd to imagine her ever swerving the least from the path of the good; all the more careful would she safeguard herself in the case of holy hermits. My people here apprehend danger through you from the rakshasas and it forms the subject of their anxious thoughts and talk. Not far from here is the city of Janasthana, the capital of Khara the rakshasa. He is the brother of Ravana; his numerous victories have heightened his natural pride and arrogance; a cruel cannibal, the sinful wretch hates you beyond all words. The rakshasas will continue to harass and persecute the hermits, so long as you stay among them. Their hideous forms and looks strike terror into the hearts of the poor recluses and truly, it is a repulsive and horrible sight to see them. They pelt our people with impure and unclean objects. They pounce upon others unawares and drink their life-blood. Sometimes they conceal themselves in the *asramas* and slay the inmates thereof. They scatter the holy vessels of sacrifice when the Fires are reverently worshipped; they put them out with huge streams of water; they shatter to pieces the vessels filled with magnetised water. My people press me to leave these haunts of wickedness and danger and seek safer spots; and it behoves me to lead them away before the wretches work them some greater evil. I know of a pleasant *asrama* hereabouts and we remove to it very shortly. It is abundantly provided with every convenience the hermits could desire—fruits, roots, and water. If you will, we will be glad to take you with us before Khara singles

you out for persecution. Gentle you are and valiant; but you have come here with your wife and should look out for danger at all times. It seems to me you will not have a pleasant life of it here". Rama tried in vain to persuade him to stay and said, "Why should you fear, when I am with you? I will see to it that you come to no harm". He was not to be convinced; he took affectionate leave of Rama and departed from the place and his people with him.

Rama followed them far on their way. They advised him as to future contingencies and gave him leave to return, which he did. The holy people were loath to part with him, far, they had benefited much by associating with that prince of saintly life and wisdom. So, the place where they lived was very dear to him even after they had left it; and he would not exchange it for any other.

CHAPTER CXVII.

MAHARSHI ATRI.

BUT, later on, he took calm counsel with himself and saw many a reason why he should not stay there. "My heart will be pained at the memory of the visit paid me here by Bharata, the royal ladies and the citizens. Again, this place has been rendered foul and unclean by the stay of the huge army of Bharata; countless horses, elephants, camels, bulls and cows camped here and these woods are very much the worse for it. A change is necessary and welcome." So, to the *asrama* of maharshi Atri he repaired with Lakshmana and Seeta; and reverently laid his head at the feet of the sage. The saint looked upon them as his

own children and extended to them the heartiest welcome. Anasooya, the ideal wife, chanced to come in and her husband said to her " I commend our girl Janaki to your care." Then addressing himself to Rama: " She is ever intent upon practising the highest dharma. Her yogic might is something inconceivable. Once in the far past, there was a terrible drought for eleven years; plant and herb, flower and leaf, creeper and tree faded and withered; yet she created them out of her *tapas* and caused a full current of water to flow in the Ganga. On another occasion, to serve the purposes of the gods, she converted eleven days into one night. Thousands of years have passed over her head while she sat in stern *tapas*, keeping the vows and observances; dangers and perils, obstacles and trials have shattered themselves against her iron will. Reverence her as the mother that bore you. She deserves the worship and adoration of all beings; her fame is equalled but by her years; anger and wrath are not to be spoken of in the same breath with her. For the good of the worlds she has practised stern *tapas* impossible for any other; she has no peer in watchful service and loyal devotion to her husband; hence her greatness is the despair of Envy. Rightly has she been named *Anasooya* (above Envy). Seeta remains with her."

" Be it so " replied Raghava and said " Seeta, daughter of Janaka the Lord of Wisdom! marked you what the maharshi advised us to secure unparalleled good to us? Hasten to the side of the noble lady." Loyal to the least wish of Rama who ever sought her welfare and happiness, she touched the feet of Anasooya in deep reverence and announced herself.

Old beyond the memory of man, she was lean, wrinkled and weak; her sparse locks were white as snow;

and her limbs shook as a plantain tree before a fierce wind. Seeta made respectful enquiries of her health and observances; the aged dame embraced her warmly, smelt the crown of her head and exclaimed "My darling! do you walk in the ways of good and faithful wives? You have renounced kith and kin, riches and comfort, vanity and selfishness and have elected to follow your husband to the woods and share his fourteen years of exile. Sinner or saint, in the palace or in the forest, a wife's place is ever at the side of her husband; the Worlds of glory are ever open to her who renders faithful and true service to her lord. He is her god, be he bad, sensual or poor. She has no dearer kin than the husband who protects her under all conditions. You can best liken him to tapas that secures imperishable merit. But, bad and foolish women have no discrimination of excellences and defects. To gratify their wishes is their sole look-out; they render no obedience to any man; it is rather the other way—*they* lord it over their husbands. Other men occupy their thoughts ever. Their feet can never be turned from the path of wickedness; they have left the path of dharma far behind them and labor hard to win the crown of deathless infamy. But, such noble women as you are well acquainted with the ups and downs, the changing conditions of life; adorned with noble excellences, they sit in glory in the Worlds of the good and the holy. Walk carefully in the footsteps of good and virtuous wives; make your husband's life and work your own. Undying fame and the world's regard are your mead here and supreme bliss hereafter." And in this wise did Anasooya unfold the duty of a faithful wife and true.

CHAPTER CXVIII.

SEETA'S ANTECEDENTS.

SEETA, whose heart knew not envy in the least, listened to the words of Anasooya and replied, "Mother! I take your advice in the spirit in which it is given. It does not suprise me; full well I know the dharma of women that their husband is their guru. I should serve and reverence my husband, be he devoid of all virtues. Now, Rama is Perfection itself; of boundless compassion and self-restraint, his heart knows no change; ever wedded to dharma, he loves me more than my mother and seeks my highest good even as my father; need I any hint or reminder of my duty to him? He makes no difference between his mother Kausalya and the other royal ladies. It is enough if a woman is regarded with love by his father, be it but once; Rama loves him so fondly and is so beautifully trained in the duties of life that he puts away pride and self-love and respects her more than his mother. I have not forgotten the good counsel given me by lady Kausalya on the eve of my departure to the woods, as also my mother's well-meant advice before the holy Fires on the occasion of my marriage. You have confirmed me in my faith and allegiance thereto. I know of no greater tapas that a woman can do than to render loyal service to her lord. It was thus that lady Savitri won the high worlds of bliss. Yourself are the brightest example thereof. That ideal wife Rohini has been raised to the skies in consequence and quits not the side of her lord for a moment. Many a faithful and devoted wife has elevated themselves to heights which the world dreams not of lifting its eyes to."

It gladdened the heart of Anasooya to hear it. " My darling! " said she, smelling the crown of her head the while " inconceivable is my might and power, the result of long and severe tapas. I would deem it a pleasure to grant you such boons as you may desire. Your words are sweet and apt; my heart rejoices thereat; what shall I do for you?" Seeta wondered at the kindness and nobility of her hostess and replied with a smile "Your presence, your company and your favour have left nothing for me to wish." The humility and devotion revealed in these words filled the soul of Anasooya with a deeper gladness and the virtuous dame exclaimed, "Nay, my pleasure shall not be barren. Behold, these wreaths, garments, ornaments and perfumed sandal paste all meet for you. These will enhance your beauty and loveliness inconceivably. Their brightness, fragrance or beauty never grow less. In fact, you will but add to the brilliance and glory of your husband hereby, even as Mahalakshmi heightens the loveliness and effulgence of her consort Narayana by her own". Janaki received them as gladly and took her seat by the side of Atri's wife. The old lady desired to hear from Seeta something that would give her inestimable delight and said, " I have heard tell that Raghava won you as his wife in a *swayamvara*. I would get you to narrate the incident to me in all its details."

" Janaka, the rajarshi " began Seeta " holds righteous rule over the broad realms of Videha. Of inconceivable might and virtue, he governs his subjects wisely and well, as becomes a monarch of men. Once, he was ploughing the sacrificial ground and I came out of earth at the end of his plough. The Great One was the weeding out the ground as the Books direct and wondered to see me there, clothed in dust and dirt.

Supremely compassionate to all beings, the childless king took me on his lap and cried 'This is my daughter', prompted by the love that welled up from his heart. Then, a voice from the sky cried out 'King! this is your daughter before god and man.' Janaka was overjoyed at it even as he came upon untold wealth and placed me in the hands of his favourite queen. They brought me up with infinite care and love, more than I could have from those that gave me birth.

"As a poor man grieves over the hopeless loss of even what little he had, my father was filled with anxious thought when I came of an age to marry. A man may be as mighty and great as the Lord of the celestials; but, if he keeps his daughter unmarried even after her age qualifies her for it, his equals and inferiors have a perfect right to despise him. Such a fate was hovering over the King and he was overwhelmed with a boundless grief, like a ship-wrecked passenger in the middle of the ocean. The difficulty was that I was not born of a woman's womb like others; it was nigh impossible to come upon a husband in every way suited to me. At last a bright idea came to him. Long ago, Lord Varuna was mightily pleased with him at a great yagna and made a present to him of a rare bow and an inexhaustible quiver of arrows. Men tried in vain to move it; the kings of the earth could never even dream of stringing it. My truthful father invited them and said 'Friends! My daughter is the wife of him who strings this bow. You have my word for it.' The assembled monarchs gazed in wonder and awe at the terrible bow, huge as a mountain and, despairing of moving it even a little, they saluted the bow and took their leave.

"Long after, my father was engaged in a yaga, when this Raghava of boundless lustre came to our place in

the company of Lakshmana and Visvamitra. After due hospitality paid and accepted, maharshi Visvamitra said to my father 'These are the sons of the emperor Dasaratha. Rama and Lakshmana are they named and are come to have a sight of your famous bow. Let Rama behold the gift of the gods to you.' My father had it brought to the audience hall; the heroic prince took it, bent it, strung it and drew it to his ear, when, lo! it gave way in the middle with a deafening thunder. My father carried out his promise and was about to pour water over Rama's hands and give me to him as his wife. But, the prince would not accept it before he intimated his father at Ayodhya thereof and had his permission. Janaka conveyed the glad news to his brother monarch, who came all gladly. My father gave me in marriage to Rama, the Lord of wisdom. My sister Oormila was taken to wife by Lakshmana. Thus, did I become the prize of Rama on the occasion of that swayamvara. That princes of heroes is the object of my ever increasing love and respect."

CHAPTER CXIX.

RAMA ENTERS THE DANDAKA.

ANASOOYA, for whom dharma had no mysteries, listened with boundless delight to Seeta's narrative; she smelt her on the head and clasped her to her breast saying, "I have heard ere this of your swayamvara that you described so graphically and pleasantly; but, it gives me a new pleasure to hear it from your lips. It is now sunset. He has left his kingdom in the charge of Night. Listen to the sounds of the birds that are about to retire to sleep in their

nests, having been out all the day in search of food. Behold these rishis that return from the river-fords after their evening bath with brimming jars in their shoulders, their dress of bark dripping all the way. Behold these others engaged at their Agnihotra from whose fire the pigeon-coloured smoke is blown away by the wind. Darkness descends on the earth and hides every thing from view; the distant trees with their sparse leaves show no gaps between them. The night-ranging beasts are coming out of their lairs. The deer and other tame animals in the asramas repose on the sacrificial platforms. Night draws near, bright with her starry ornaments. The moon walks up the sky robed in white moonlight. It is time for you to be with Rama. It gave me great delight to listen to your pleasant narrrative. Let me have the pleasure of seeing you put on the things I gave you". Seeta obeyed her and reverently took her leave.

Rama beheld with joy the approach of his darling even when she was at a distance, decked with the affectionate presents of Anasoolya, the holy lady. Janaki drew near and showed him the garments, the wreaths and the ornaments. The brothers were delighted to behold those rare articles impossible for man to hope to get. They spent the night in the asrama of maharshi Atri and the next morning they approached the rishis after their matin prayers and requested leave to depart. The holy Ones said to him "We find it perilous to go out to gather fruits, roots and other necessaries of life. The rakshasas roam these forests. The cruel cannibals change their shapes at will. Other ferocious wild beasts there are that cause equal fear. The rakshasas pounce upon such of our people as are careless or impure. We pray you to drive them

from here. There is the path we have made in the forests to go in search of woodland fare. Follow it and you will be very soon in the dark and pathless Dandaka". They gave the princes and Seeta their heartiest blessings and sent them on their journey. And Rama, Lakshmana and Janaki entered the heart of that dark forest, like the Lord of light entering a bank of clouds.